

SRI AUROBINDO — THE POET

K. D. SETHNA



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PONDICHERRY

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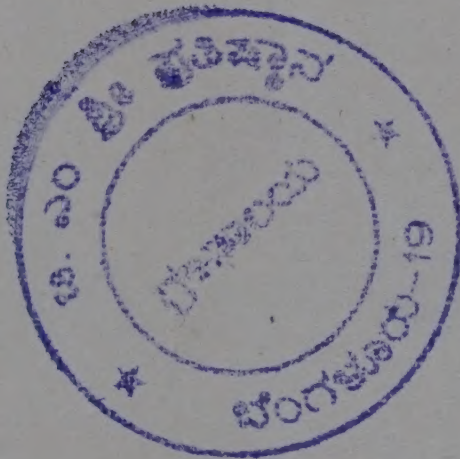
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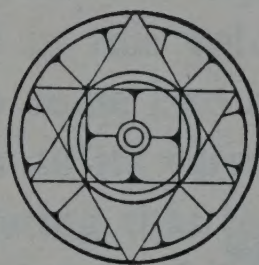
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First Edition : 1970

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March 1970

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

We are very happy to publish this research work of Mr. K. D. Sethna.

As explained in the author's Introductory Note, it is a companion volume to his earlier study, *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*. Himself a poet as well as a disciple of Sri Aurobindo, Mr. Sethna may be said to bring an inside knowledge of the art with which the present book is concerned. The papers collected here are the result of a penetrating search for the soul of poetry and the possibilities of its highest expression. We are sure the readers will find in this volume critical perceptions which will enable them to come into an intimate contact with Sri Aurobindo's poetry in all its varied range.

We have pleasure in stating that the Government of India have given a grant to our Centre of Education to meet the cost of publishing *Sri Aurobindo—the Poet*.

12th March 1970

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This collection of surveys, studies, discussions, annotations, queries and controversies is meant to serve, in general, as a companion volume to the author's earlier book of 1947, *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*. What was there developed is, as a rule, practically passed over here, except when a too scant treatment would leave a serious gap in the exposition. Similarly, that book itself avoided repeating the contents of two pieces written before it and now included in this. But either work, in its particular way, has a certain completeness of its own.

The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo worked out a definite scheme in three parts. The present collection is a looser series, yet a significant sequence in a sometimes strict and sometimes broad sense has been attempted in the arrangement. Further, as the essays were written at different times to meet various needs, there is a small amount of overlapping amongst them. But for the most part they bring forward new aspects and complement one another as both analytical and evaluative commentaries. Even when a few quotations repeat and a topic is touched again, fresh light is sought to be thrown in a setting which is itself new.

The title of the book has the interest of deriving indirectly from Sri Aurobindo himself. It is the same as that of the opening piece which was originally called "Sri Aurobindo as a Poet". Sri Aurobindo found the name rather flat and suggested the proper caption.

The poetry of Sri Aurobindo is too vast and rich for a mere couple of fair-sized volumes to do full justice to it. But the author has tried his best to give a succession of interpretative insights, hoping to catch the "many-splendoured" poet in his essentiality even if failing to cope in a satisfying manner with his totality.

This procedure must involve some sins of omission. Yet, when properly understood, they may become pardonable. To range exhaustively over each *genre* practised by Sri Aurobindo has not been the avowed pursuit. Nor has it been the explicit aim in any of the dissertations to follow a story or to expound its message. Even those long poems which have been dealt with at a length seeming more or less commensurate have hardly been searched in particular for the sake of the plot or the “philosophy”: both have emerged into view on several occasions but mostly in the course of appreciating the fine points of the literary expression. The imaginative cast, the emotional mould, the verbal shape, the rhythmic pattern and, behind everything, what may be designated the intuitive turn creating and animating by its inner form and function all the outer forms and functions: these have been the principal object of sympathetic scrutiny and critical enjoyment. The concentration has been on the poetic art of Sri Aurobindo. And this art can be appraised in its fundamentals by no more than judicious dips into various sections of a number of works or even into just one work typical of many. Lack of close study of the tale’s unfoldment and the theme’s presentation leaves unaffected the quality of the appraisal. So too does want of sampling every member of a literary class. In the event, the sins of omission appear rather natural acts, though what is omitted is never shunned as intrinsically negligible.

However, Sri Aurobindo is not only the poetic artist: in fact, he is chiefly something else and something more. Again, the art of poetry at its subtlest and greatest is itself an instrument of the art of life and even channels a way for a force and a value beyond both life and poetry: the force is felt as a rapturous inspiration, the value cognised as a luminous revelation. So a perceptive plumbing of the artistry of self-expression in a poet like Sri Aurobindo is especially bound to overpass the domain of

art proper, the inner intuitive form of consciousness no less than the outer linguistic form of communication. Sri Aurobindo's universal humanity, his far-ranging contact with secular living, his comprehensive venture to convert the human into the divine, his movement towards an all-round sagehood and seerhood, his long mission to establish on earth a wider liberty one with a deeper self-law, a more inclusive love in tune with a higher light are sure to break out in whatever he does. A book about the poet in him must bring in his transcendence of the poetic art. It may bypass the story-teller and the plot-weaver, the message-giver and the theme-builder. But to omit his transcendence of the poetic art is a sin the book would be powerless to commit, even if it strove to do so.

All the same, the act of transcending is brought home mainly in connection with the poetic art. It is Sri Aurobindo the poet who stands here in the forefront. And through his inward-outward creativity of perfection in word, phrase, line and passage all the rest of him has to assume a body.

Perhaps such a mode of development will be deemed a limitation. But, if there is a limitation, it is one which cries out to be accepted — for two reasons. First, has not Sri Aurobindo declared that the poet was the earliest side of his personality, the primal aspect, as it were? We may add that none of the others coming later diminished the poet. The poet grew along with them. Possibly they grew out of him and it was the poet who exceeded himself with their coming: Sri Aurobindo the poet chose to transcend his art. The wielder of the poetic art was basic to Sri Aurobindo's grand whole.

Secondly, to appreciate poetry as an art is a difficult job, calling for a large sensitivity, an intense penetrativeness. If one does not gather oneself up in a book to meet the rigours of this occupation one is very likely to disperse one's energy and be unsuccessful. The field is often entered but rarely mastered. If

any degree of mastery can arrive only on condition that one gets narrowed and specialised, is it not worth being confined to a small-seeming circle of activity? The apparent smallness is in itself no fault. Everything depends on the possibilities opened up within it. And when one's mind is fixed on a poet of all life who is also a thinker and seer and mystic, one may point happily to that ancient symbol of poetic fervour and spiritual illumination as well as of earth-quickenning ardour, the symbol of India's Surya-Savitri and Greece's Phoebus Apollo — the sun which, to all appearance and for all practical purposes, is but a small circle in the immensity of the sky.

11.3.1970

K. D. SETHNA

SRI AUROBINDO — THE POET *

To see a star of the first literary magnitude swim into our ken makes one of the rarest and richest moments of life. But there are thrills and thrills; and while it may strike us dumb to discover all of a sudden “deep-brow’d” Homer’s “demesne”, it may prove difficult to stand

Silent, upon a peak in Darien,

if we find that a *mare magnum* already familiar to us had all along a shade of glory we had never distinguished—that, for instance, it was Homer who also wrote Plato or that the author of the *Republic* was the true wizard who even here in the world of Impermanence had made the phenomenal ill-fate of Ilium almost a divine Idea. Such indeed is the blessing of surprise in store for those of us Indians by birth or by affinity, who have heard of Sri Aurobindo the great nationalist prophet of the century’s opening decade and Sri Aurobindo the illumined philosopher and Yogi of Pondicherry in the subsequent years but scarcely realise that his poetic inspiration has been as unsur-

* This article—except for one additional passage helping the ends of poetic comparison—was first printed in 1929 in the cultural monthly, *Orient*, of Bombay. It is also the first lengthy and comprehensive study written of Sri Aurobindo’s published poetry up to that year—barring translated work and his earliest blank-verse narrative, *Urvasie*, which was out of print and not even in his own possession. Previous to this article, only two short notices attempting critical evaluation had come out: James Cousins’ “The Philosopher as Poet” in *New Ways in English Literature* and a review of Sri Aurobindo’s *Songs to Myrtila* by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya in the Madras periodical, *Sh’ama*. The present article was read by Sri Aurobindo before publication and it had the good fortune to obtain from him an encouraging comment: “It is admirably written both as to style and force of presentation of the thought.”

passed as his political idealism, his intellectual power and his towering spiritual attainment.

Born in India on August 15, 1872, but educated from his early boyhood in England and speaking the English language as if it were his mother-tongue, he was already at nineteen an unmistakable poet, writing in a vein which is little short of remarkable, considering that only a few even among English singers have distilled such pure nectar at so early an age. No one with a ear for sound-values, an eye for apt images and a little ability to look below the surface can fail to observe that his juvenilia hold just the right sort of promise. For, provided there is always an aspiration towards something “translunary”, however vaguely perceived, an abundant felicity of phrase and fancy is altogether the best starting-point for a poet. The ecstasy of insight which is the acme of metrical utterance and lays bare the very heart and meaning of the world in one shade or another can hardly be reached if a poet has not in his early life brooded with intent joy and devotion on rhythms and figures. He must be a true artist in those formative years which precede his ultimate message to mankind; unless his medium has already been made sufficiently musical and imaginative he can never in his hour of maturity reveal in an authentic poetic accent an aspect of “divine philosophy”. And who can deny either music or imaginative subtlety to Sri Aurobindo when in his *Songs to Myrtilla*, written largely in his late teens under the influence of a close contact with the Greek Muse, he gives us piece after finely-wrought piece of natural magic? Whether we listen to him telling us how the earth is full of whispers after twilight and the daily voice of men is not heard,

But higher audience brings
The footsteps of invisible things,
When o’er the glimmering tree-tops bowed
The night is leaning on a luminous cloud,

or expressing the delicate exhilaration imparted by the grace of Eros and constantly enjoyed as an ever-new surprise

Since in the silver mist
Bright Cymothea's lips I kissed,
Whose laughter dances like a gleam
Of sunlight on a hidden stream
That through a wooded way
Runs suddenly into the perfect day,

or giving tongue to the unexpected fear and sadness breathed into the heart of youth by the cheerless suggestions of a night by the sea:

Love, a moment drop thy hands;
Night within my soul expands.
Veil thy beauties milk-rose-fair
In that dark and showering hair.
Coral kisses ravish not
When the soul is tinged with thought;
Burning looks are then forbid.
Let each shyly-parted lid
Hover like a settling dove
O'er those deep-blue wells of Love...
To the wind that with him dwells
Ocean, old historian, tells
All the dreadful heart of tears
Hidden in the pleasant years...
We shall lose, ah me! too soon
Lose the clear and silent moon,
The serenities of night
And the deeper evening light.
We shall know not when the morn

In the widening East is born,
 Never feel the west-wind stir,
 Spring's delightful messenger,
 Never under branches lain
 Dally with the sweet-lipped rain,
 Watch the moments of the tree,
 Nor know the sounds that tread the sea—

whether, in short, we find him moved to joy or touched to melancholy by the hues and harmonies of life, there is, without the least doubt, that unanalysable quality in him which proves that here is the first utterance of an exceptionally gifted mind. Now and then we even come across a passage which makes us feel the glow and vibration of some immeasurable *mantra* lodged in the writer's inmost being, though he himself might not be fully aware of it, and waiting there for ripening experience to deliver it in its native speech of spirit instead of in the accent of ordinary psychological motives. Such, for instance, is the following, based ostensibly on Greek elegiac style, where the pan-piping lover, in the midst of his lament by the banks of the Arethuse for the cruel manner in which Nisa has forsaken him for Mopsus, longs for death:

Oplaintive murmuring reed, breathe yet thy strain.
 Ye glades, your bliss I grudge you not,
 Nor would I that my grief profane
 Your sacred summer with intruding thought.
 Yet since I will no more behold
 Your glorious beauty stained with gold
 From shadows of her hair, nor by some well
 Made naked of their sylvan dress
 The breasts, the limbs I never shall possess,
 Therefore, O Mother Arethuse, farewell.

Mark how the consonances, assonances, long vowels, and slow spondees interspersing the iambic beat hum and sing and with the help of the grammatical suspense of the last sentence, indefinitely draw out the sense as if into strange remote spaces beyond or behind the earth's horizon. No less magical and suggestive is the intonation which charges the atmosphere with full yet restrained emotion at the beginning of "The Island Grave":

Ocean is there and evening; the slow moan
Of the blue waves that like a shaken robe
Two heard together once, one hears alone.

Now gliding white and hushed towards our globe
Keen January with cold eyes and clear
And snowdrops pendent in each frosty lobe

Ushers the first born of the radiant year.
Haply his feet that grind the breaking mould,
May brush the dead grass on thy secret bier,

Haply his joyless fingers wan and cold
Caress the ruined masses of thy hair,
Pale child of winter, dead ere youth was old...

There is here, apart from verbal artistry, a trembling of the heart's rhythm on the verge of a sort of incantation which gives us vague mystic hints, persuading us to look for some poem or other by this boy not yet twenty, where we would find a sign of some wide intensity of idealism. We are not disappointed; for a little piece in the same collection embodies, despite its apparent call to the near and the tangible rather than to "solitary thinkings", an extremely fine feeling of the greatness and divine

lustre of the human soul—especially the human soul in its moments of utter self-giving:

Why do thy lucid eyes survey,
 Estelle, their sisters in the Milky Way?
 The blue heavens cannot see
 Thy beauty nor the planets praise.
 Blindly they walk their old accustomed ways.
 Turn hither for felicity.
 My body's earth thy vernal power declares,
 My spirit is a heaven of thousand stars,
 And all these lights are thine and open doors on thee.

It is, however, in the touching *Envoi* which Sri Aurobindo appended in 1895 to his juvenilia that we are given distinctly to know that a spiritual hunger was always present in him. On the surface, this hunger was an artistic desire to endow his poetic expression with a certain potent ease—not by any means facility, but inspired fluency, subtle, limpid or sweetly solemn as the occasion required. This he achieved very well, spontaneity and finish being stamped almost everywhere in *Songs to Myrtilla*. But he was not satisfied, since it was not only Art but also life that he wanted to make glorious in a supreme unflickering fire of beauty. His Muse was no mere goddess of poetry, but a secret cosmic Spontaneity of beautiful creation, a Plenitude of Power whose words are worlds. He aspired to live poetry as well as write it; and his failure to discover in the hopes and loves and labours of ordinary life anything final to rest upon, cast a painful shadow over his art, gave his sweetest songs a lingering note of sad hopelessness, making him feel that the highest in him stood unliberated and inarticulate. That indeed seems to be the true significance of the magnificent stanzas with which the *Envoi* opens:

Pale poems, weak and few, who vainly use
 Your wings towards the unattainable spheres,
 Offspring of the divine Hellenic Muse,
 Poor maimed children born of six disastrous years!

Not as your mother's is your wounded grace,
 Since not to me with equal love returned
 The hope which drew me to that serene face
 Wherein no unrepentful light of effort burned.

And the reason of his discontent and sense of frustration was that he missed a practical method to realise, to incarnate, the high serenity which the mind of Greece had in its theoretic flights conceived. Greek Art and Philosophy, in spite of the transcendental ideal they envisaged, were directed more towards moral and aesthetic ends than towards strictly spiritual fulfilment: a certain indispensable inwardness was lacking, which only India could give to the Indian in Sri Aurobindo, with her agelong yogas, sadhanas and soaring tapasyas, her incessant cry to what the Vedas had called the Dawn of God, the everlasting flush of divine self-revelation to all who look up in appeal from the strife and trouble of the mortal world:

Vision delightful who standest crowned on the hills far above
 me,
 Vision of bliss, stoop down to mortality. Lean down and love
 me!
 Dawn on me over the edge of the world, across twilight's
 margin,
 Heal my unease with thyself, O heaven-born delicate virgin!
 Thou hast the stars to sport with, the winds are the friends
 of thy sweetness;
 Marred am I, earth-bound, troubled with longing,—thrust
 down from completeness.¹

¹ This passage reads a little differently in *Collected Poems and Plays* (1942,

Unlike, however, the conventional mystic, Sri Aurobindo did not yearn to escape into some ineffable Nirvana leaving the earth to its bitter failures and privations. He had the unshakable conviction that mere tranquillity of trance-absorption is not our end and what the inner heart seeks is fulfilment, in the universe, of all that makes the universe so passionate and full of colour. To call down into this very life whatever Transcendent there might be was the guiding principle of his mysticism: it was soon to become his master-passion and lead him away from the political field into which he had launched some years after his return from England. Thus, in 1910, induced by five years of growing inner illumination through the practice of Yoga side by side with public activity, he withdrew to Pondicherry to perfect an integral method of spiritual askesis by which those supra-mental ranges of consciousness of which the seers of the Upanishads had spoken would be rendered accessible to the waking state and brought down to transfigure earth-existence. But before he retired from public life, he had already written, besides a large number of shorter poems and some translations from Kalidasa and Bhartrihari, two perfectly admirable narratives in blank verse which were published several years later in book-form.

Both of these are Indian in matter and spirit, and the shorter pieces too show in various lights the facets of Indian thought; but there is one inimitable fragment which suggests that, though Greek traditions were no longer his main preoccupation, he had not quite forsaken his early love. Suddenly in the midst of the heat and challenge of the political controversy which he was conducting in an English weekly edited by himself, he came forward with this pearl beyond price, throwing it at random among fiery nationalistic articles concerned with the standing

Vol. II, p. 141) where the long piece *Ahana*, whose opening it forms, has been revised and enlarged.—K.D.S., 1970.

grievances of the hour. Fragmentary as it is, it is yet one of his utterly unimpeachable creations from the purely aesthetic point of view, with its high Homeric beginning and the lyrical surprise which follows it, drawing by their play of contrasting imagery the most charming character-sketch possible of Priam's son:

Rushing from Troy like a cloud on the plains the Trojans
thundered,
Just as a storm comes thundering, thick with the dust of
kingdoms,
Edged with the devious dance of the lightning, so all Troas
Loud with the roar of the chariot, loud with the vaunt and
the war-cry,
Rushed from Troywards gleaming with spears and rolled on
enormous.
Joyous as ever Paris led them glancing in armour,
Brilliant with gold like a bridegroom, playing with death
and the battle
Even as apart in his chamber he played with his beautiful
Helen,
Touching her body rejoicing with a low and lyrical laughter,
So he laughed as he smote his foremen. Round him the
arrows,
Round him the spears of the Argives sang like voices of
maidens
Trilling the anthem of bridal bliss, the chant hymeneal;
Round him the warriors fell like flowers strewn at a bridal
Red with the beauty of blood.

Even if Sri Aurobindo had given us nothing else save just this passage, we would have known at once that the hand of a true artist had been at work. But that would have been, in one sense,

a rather sad knowledge, for our regret at having no more would have been unlimited. Fortunately, he has left us little room for mere guesswork as to his superabundant genius. For he has made it difficult for us to attempt restraint in speaking of the marvellous imaginative alchemy of *Love and Death* or the pure epic strength and sweep of *Baji Prabhou*, his two hitherto published poems of long breath.¹ In the former he touched in one magnificent flight heights which can only be called classical. This is high praise indeed, but is it after all inapt to ask if anything could be more Shakespearean than, for example, this little soliloquy of Ruru on returning to Priyumvada after having stolen from her side in the early morning to go “seeking comparisons for her bloom” among the best that he could pluck from woods of the earth’s prime?

“And she will turn from me with angry tears
Her delicate face more beautiful than storm
Or rainy moonlight. I will follow her,
And soothe her heart with sovereign flatteries;
Or rather all tyranny exhaust and taste
The beauty of her anger like a fruit,
Vexing her soul with helplessness; then soften
Easily with quiet undenied demand
Of heart insisting upon heart...”

Or take this burst of sublime language, like fierce rain:

“For what is mere sunlight?
Who would live on into extreme old age,

¹ The “imaginative alchemy” of the still earlier published but unknown *Urvasie*, which has greater length than either of these, has been dealt with in some detail in the first part of *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo* (1948).—K.D.S., 1970.

Burden the impatient world, a weary old man,
 And look back on a selfish time ill-spent
 Exacting out of prodigal great life
 Small separate pleasures like a usurer,
 And no rich sacrifice and no large act
 Finding oneself in others, nor the sweet
 Expense of nature in her passionate gusts
 Of love and giving, first of the soul's needs?"

Or hear Yama the God of Death address Ruru when that impetuous boy offers half his life as a sacrifice to recover the snake-bitten, prematurely lost Priyumvada:

"Not as a tedious evil nor to be
 Lightly rejected gave the gods old age,
 But tranquil, but august, but making easy
 The steep ascent to God. Therefore must Time
 Still batter down the glory and form of youth
 And animal magnificent strong ease,
 To warn the earthward man that he is spirit
 Dallying with transience, nor by death he ends,
 Nor to the dumb warm mother's arms is bound,
 But called unborn into the unborn skies."

Or again, relish the psychological subtlety of word and rhythm, where to the essentially Shakespearean note is added a sensuous felicity peculiar to Kalidasa:

"Priyumvada!"

He cried, and at that well-loved sound there dawned
 With overwhelming sweetness miserable
 Upon his mind the old delightful times
 When he had called her by her liquid name,
 Where the voice loved to linger. He remembered

The chompuc bushes where she turned away
Half-angered, and his speaking of her name
Masterfully as to a lovely slave
Rebellious who has erred; at that the slow
Yielding of her small head, and after a little
Her sliding towards him and beautiful
Propitiating body as she sank down
With timid graspings deprecatingly
In prostrate warm surrender, her flushed cheeks
Upon his feet and little touches soft;
Or her long name uttered beseechingly,
And the swift leap of all her body to him,
And eyes of large repentance, and the weight
Of her wild bosom and lips unsatisfied;
Or hourly call for little trivial needs,
Or sweet unneeded wanton summoning,
Daily appeal that never staled nor lost
Its sudden music, and her lovely speed,
Sedulous occupation left, quick-breathing,
With great glad eyes and eager parted lips;
Or in deep quiet moments murmuring
That name like a religion in her ear,
And her calm look compelled to ecstasy;
Or to the river luring her, or breathed
Over her dainty slumber, or secret sweet
Bridal outpourings of her broken name.
All these as rush unintermitting waves
Upon a swimmer overborne, broke on him
Relentless, things too happy to be endured...

Then observe those passages and lines which achieve by grace, balance, poignancy or strength of diction a many-shaded aesthetic quality which puts us at a most pleasurable loss to decide

whether they are more Virgilian or Dantesque. Begin with this glimpse of morning in a wood—

(He) felt slow beauty
And leafy secret change; for the damp leaves,
Grey-green at first, grew pallid with the light
And warmed with consciousness of sunshine near;
Then the whole daylight wandered in, and made
Hard tracts of splendour, and enriched all hues—

dwell a little on the exquisite pathos of the picture—

She for a moment stood
Beautiful with her love before she died;
And he laughed towards her—

proceed to the quiet but terrible lines—

So still he was,
The birds flashed by him with their swift small wings,
Fanning him. Then he moved, then rigorous
Memory through all his body shuddering
Awoke and he looked up and knew the place,
And recognised greenness immutable,
And saw old trees and the same flowers still bloom.
He felt the bright indifference of earth
And all the lonely uselessness of pain—

follow up with a brief contrast of the grand style in simplicity—

“Then in the joys of heaven we shall consort,
Amid the gladness often touching hands
To make bliss sure”—

to the same manner handled with tremendous severity when Ruru, in his search through Hades, chilled at “the cry not meant for living ears”, pervading that region—

but terrible strong love
Was like a fiery finger in his breast
Pointing him on—

and reach a climax in the combination of both in his moan at the sight of anguished ghosts drifting on “the penal waters”, a moan of profound pity, with one line in it—the twelfth—of complex alliteration, which is also a fount of inexhaustible vowel-music:

“O miserable race of men,
With violent and passionate souls you come
Foredoomed upon the earth and live brief days
In fear and anguish, catching at stray beams
Of sunlight, little fragrances of flowers;
Then from your spacious earth in a great horror
Descend into this night, and here too soon
Must expiate your few inadequate joys.
O bargain hard! Death helps us not. He leads
Alarmed, all shivering from his chill embrace,
The naked spirit here. Oh my sweet flower,
Art thou too whelmed in this fierce wailing flood?
Ah me! But I will haste and deeply plunge
Into its hopeless pools and either bring
Thy old warm beauty back beneath the stars,
Or find thee out and clasp thy tortured bosom
And kiss thy sweet wrung lips and hush thy cries.
Love shall draw half thy pain into my limbs;
Then we shall triumph glad of agony.”

It would be difficult to find a match for so richly composite a texture with so many tones striking across it of pathos and passion. One's memory cannot help going back to that most wonderful of farewells in the presence of death, Romeo's last soliloquy, the top poetic reach of Shakespeare's youth:

“Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That insubstantial Death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorrèd monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be thy paramour?
For fear of that, I still will stay with thee;
And never from this palace of dim night
Depart again; here, here will I remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids; O here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! and lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain with engrossing death.”

Surely it is not difficult with even these few instances before us to understand what the classical touch is—unmistakable in the midst of all diversity of subject or treatment. For there is no slavish imitation or echo; rather, a versatile originality winning rapid access to the worlds of visions and voices to which only the masters have the key. This is brought out even more convincingly in another passage which challenges comparison with those lines by Milton which have often been considered some of the most majestic in the language—the description of Satan's army of rebels:

Cruel his eye, but cast
Signs of remorse and passion to behold

The fellows of his crime, the followers rather
 (Far other once beheld in bliss) condemned
 For ever now to have their lot in pain;
 Millions of spirits for his fault amerced
 Of heaven and from eternal splendours flung
 For his revolt; yet faithful how they stood,
 Their glory withered: as when heaven's fire
 Hath scathed the forest oaks, or mountain pines,
 With singèd top, their stately growth, though bare,
 Stands on the blasted heath.

Side by side read now the words in which the sorrow of Ruru at the loss of his young mate is made vivid:

Long months he travelled between grief and grief,
 Reliving thoughts of her with every pace,
 Measuring vast pain in his immortal mind.
 And his heart cried in him as when a fire
 Roars through wide forests and the branches cry
 Burning towards heaven in torture glorious.
 So burned, immense, his grief within him; he raised
 His young pure face all solemnised with pain,
 Voiceless. Then Fate was shaken, and the Gods
 Grieved for him, of his silence grown afraid.

It is impossible to decide which passage is more nobly conceived and executed, and which of the two analogous similes more stupendously beautiful in originality of application. But one thing is certain: the moment Sri Aurobindo was capable of writing these lines he stood among the elect. That was in 1899, the last year of the century which had produced *Hyperion*, perhaps the only other poem in English which could compass so well the packed splendour of a Miltonic moment. But

Sri Aurobindo is not only able to command the grand style at will; he can also bring to his work a quality which the great Puritan in the days of his *Paradise Lost* as good as allowed to atrophy, a subtle yet puissant interfusion of fantasy with strength and grandeur, a touch half Coleridgean half Shelleyan in the midst of Miltonic energy. Milton himself would have been full of it, had he followed up and perfected his early manner and written his *magnum opus* after a life of continuous poetic development instead of turning to do so after a long period of religio-political controversy. As it is, the account of Ruru's voyage to the underworld, armed with the magic flower given him by the God of Love, "a quivering magnificence...whose petals changed like flame", stands almost a solitary wonder of its kind. He is bidden to sail

"To that high meeting of the Ganges pure
With vague and violent Ocean. There arise
And loudly appeal my brother, the wild sea."

And, after passing through many lands, he arrives at last where

In a thin soft eve
Ganges spread far her multitudinous waves,
A glimmering restlessness with voices large,
And from the forests of that half-seen bank
A boat came heaving over it, white-winged,
With a sole silent helmsman marble-pale.
Then Ruru by his side stepped in; they went
Down the mysterious river and beheld
The great banks widen out of sight. The world
Was water and the skies to water plunged.
All night with a dim motion gliding down
He felt the dark against his eyelids; felt,

As in a dream more real than daylight,
The helmsman with his dumb and marble face
Near him and moving wideness all around,
And that continual gliding dimly on,
As one who on a shoreless water sails
For ever to a port he shall not win.
But when the darkness paled, he heard a moan
Of mightier waves and had the wide great sense
Of ocean and the depths below our feet.
But the boat stopped; the pilot lifted on him
His marble gaze coeval with the stars.
Then in the white-winged boat the boy arose
And saw around him the vast sea all grey
And heaving in the pallid dawning light.
Loud Ruru cried across the murmur: "Hear me,
O inarticulate grey Ocean, hear.
If any cadence in thy infinite
Rumour was caught from lover's moan, O Sea,
Open thy abysses to my mortal tread.
For I would travel to the despairing shades,
The spheres of suffering where entangled dwell
Souls unreleased and the untimely dead
Who weep remembering...

Lo, this petalled fire,
How freshly it blooms and lasts with my great pain!"
He held the flower out subtly glimmering.
And like a living thing the huge sea trembled,
Then rose, calling, and filled the sight with waves,
Converging all its giant crests; towards him
Innumerable waters loomed and heaven
Threatened. Horizon on horizon moved
Dreadfully swift; then with a prone wide sound
All Ocean hollowing drew him swiftly in,

Curving with monstrous menace over him.
He down the gulf where the loud waves collapsed
Descending, saw with floating hair arise
The daughters of the sea in pale green light,
A million mystic breasts suddenly bare,
And came beneath the flood and stunned beheld
A mute stupendous march of waters race
To reach some viewless pit beneath the world...

But enough! We have drawn quite sufficiently on this extraordinary poem; and yet there are other passages in it almost as astonishingly imaginative, describing the “dead grace” of the nether regions and the psychological phantasmagoria of their life—a veritable *embarras de richesse* for the quotation-lover.

The same can be said of *Baji Prabhou*, written indeed in a different vein but no less splendid an achievement—granite in its suggestion of strength and at the same time as brightly flexible and resonant as a Damascus blade. It is founded on the historical incident of the tremendous self-sacrifice of Baji Prabhou Deshpande, who to cover Shivaji’s retreat held the fort of Rangana for over two hours with a small company of men against twelve thousand Moguls. The metre is, in the truest sense of the epithet, the heroic blank verse, breathing in every line the dauntless ardour of the protagonists—the angry impatience of Agra to put an opportune end to Shivaji’s intolerable career and the grim resolution of the Mahrattas to thwart and foil the Moguls to the last. The language is full-winded and noble, with a staccato rapidity at times to heighten the impression of the deadly combat up and down the rugged slope of a “tiger-throated gorge”. There is constantly present the sense of a fight against implacable fate: hence the occasional pressing of many shades of meaning into a few powerful phrases,

as though to remind us continually of the immediate peril and the shortness of precious time in hand. And yet nowhere is the terseness obscure, depriving the action of its essentially direct martial character; nor, on the other hand, is there any lack of that lyrical feeling which alone makes war an arena of the soul as much as of brute flesh. But even this rapture is deepened beyond any danger of false glamour by being intensified into a high religious experience. In fact, the principal merit of the poem is the completely satisfying manner in which the author has revealed the spiritual heart of the Mahratta insurgence under Shivaji, the flaming inspiration of the patriot saint Ramdas which made the former a leader of men who thought and felt and acted as if they were instruments of a divine Power—Bhavani, the Goddess believed to preside over the destiny of India. The whole movement is worked out from this central motive with one master stroke after another: each word and phrase seems to be poised and weighed in the balance before being welded with those preceding and, though less delightfully bold than in *Love and Death*, the skilful enjambment or overlapping of the sense in different lines renders vivid and colourful with a large variety of internal cadence what would otherwise have been, in dealing with such a theme, an exercise in blank verse either stiffly monotonous or prosaically blatant. The very opening scene may well serve as a first instance of the inspiration and art of the entire piece:

A noon of Deccan with its tyrant glare
Oppressed the earth; the hills stood deep in haze,
And sweltering athirst the fields glared up
Longing for water in the courses parched
Of streams long dead. Nature and man alike,
Imprisoned by a bronze and brilliant sky,
Sought an escape from that wide trance of heat.

Nor on rare herdsman only or patient hind
Tilling the earth or tending sleeplessly
The well-eared grain that burden fell. It hung
Upon the Mogul horsemen as they rode
With lances at the charge, the surf of steel
About them and behind, as they recoiled
Or circled, where the footmen ran and fired,
And fired again and ran.

Then follows an account of how Shivaji had hoped the same morning to take by storm a favourable mountain fortress and command the whole stretch of the adjacent territory but had been driven back by an overwhelming number of Moguls to his own hills, till by noon his forces had been lamentably thinned and not all their guerilla tactics availed against the pursuers.

At last they reached a tiger-throated gorge
Upon the way to Raigurh. Narrowing there
The hills draw close, and their forbidding cliffs
Threaten the prone incline. The Bhonsle paused,
His fiery glance travelled in one swift gyre
Hill, gorge and valley and with speed returned
Mightily like an eagle on the wing
To a dark youth beside him, Malsurè
The younger, with his bright and burning eyes,
Who wordless rode quivering, as on the leash;
His fierce heart hungered for the rear, where Death
Was singing mid the laughter of the swords.
“Ride, Suryaji,” the Chieftain cried, his look
Inward, intent, “and swiftly from the rear
Summon the Prabhou.” Turning at the word
Suryaji’s hooves sped down the rock-strewn slope
Into the trenchant valley’s depth.

In answer to the summons Baji gallops to the Chief, who shows him the strategic position of the gorge and asks him to crown his career of heroism by posting himself there with a picked company in order to hold the enemy at bay till Shivaji should return with reinforcements from Raigurh:

“Say with what force thy iron heart can hold
The passage till I come. Thou seest our strength,
How it has melted like the Afghan’s ice
Into a pool of blood.” And while he paused
Who had been chosen, spoke an iron man
With iron brows who rode behind the Chief,
Tanaji Malsurè, that living sword :
“Not for this little purpose was there need
To call the Prabhou from his toil. Enough,
Give me five hundred men; I hold the pass
Till thy return.” But Shivaji kept still
His great and tranquil look upon the face
Of Baji Prabhou. Then, all black with wrath,
Wrinkling his fierce hard eyes, the Malsurè :
“What ponders then the hero? Such a man
Of men, he needs not like us petty swords
A force behind him, but alone will hold
All Rajasthan and Agra and Cabool
From rise to set.”

To this taunt Baji replies in one of the most nobly thrilling passages in epic literature:

“Tanaji Malsurè, not in this living net
Of flesh and nerve, nor in the flickering mind
Is a man’s manhood seated. God within
Rules us, who in the Brahmin and the dog

Can, if He will, show equal godhead. Not
By men is mightiness achieved; Baji
Or Malsurè is but a name, a robe,
And covers one alone. We but employ
Bhavani's strength, who in an arm of flesh
Is mighty as in the thunder and the storm.
I ask for fifty swords." And Malsurè :
"Well, Baji, I will build thee such a pyre
As man had never yet, when we return;
For all the Deccan brightening shall cry out,
'Baji the Prabhou burns!' " And with a smile
The Prabhou answered : "Me thou shall not burn.
For this five feet or more of bone and flesh,
Whether pure flame or jackals of the hills
Be fattened with its rags, may well concern
Others, not Baji Prabhou."

Then Shivaji rides off, leaving the slender band of heroes in
the gorge. The Moguls immediately begin their assault and,
though often hurled back, thrust on,

a mingled mass,
Pathan and Mogul and the Rajput clans,
All clamorous with the brazen throats of war
And spitting smoke and fire. The bullets rang
Upon the rocks, but in their place unhurt,
Sheltered by tree and rock, the silent grim
Defenders waited, till on root and stone
The confident high-voiced triumphant surge
Began to break, to stumble, then to pause,
Confusion in its narrowed front. At once
The muskets clamoured out, the bullets sped,
Deadly though few; again and yet again,

And some of the impetuous faltered back
And some in wrath pressed on; and while they swayed
Poised between flight and onset, blast on blast
The volleyed death invisible hailed in
Upon uncertain ranks. The leaders fell,
The forward by the bullets chosen out,
Prone or supine or leaning like sick men
O'er trees and rocks, distressed the whole advance
With prohibition by the silent slain.
So the great onset failed.

But the Mogul army was not to be disheartened; nor, on the other hand, would the Mahrattas yield an inch. Then

The heads that planned pushed swiftly to the front
The centre yet unhurt, where Rajasthan,
Playmate of death, had sent her hero sons.
They with a rapid royal reckless pace
Came striding over the perilous fire-swept ground,
Nor answered uselessly the bullets thick
Nor paused to judge, but o'er the increasing dead
Leaping and striding, shouting, sword in hand,
Rushed onward with immortal courage high
In mortal forms, and held the lower slope.

Never has the inmost essence of the Rajput spirit on the battle-field been so monumentally described in a few phrases. "Playmate of death" is absolutely unexcelled, and approached only by the fine alliteration which follows it in the next line... But even the Rajputs could not reach the higher incline; for, like "the rapid breath of Agra's hot simoon" the Mahratta musketry bore them down, till to retrieve the disgrace

A lord

High-crested of the Rathore clan stood out
From the perplexed assailants, with his sword
Beckoning the thousands on against the few.

With a violent desperate urge they clambered up and stood almost face to face with the defenders who leaped out at them, hacking with all their might, three times prevailing against the repeated onslaught. At last the Rathore lord hurled himself forward in a last attempt to reach the heart of the fort, and the close-locked hand-to-hand tussle gave great hopes to the watchers in the valley, for now numbers seemed sure to tell. But their expectations were not fulfilled:

For, as in the front

The Rathore stood on the disputed verge
And ever threw fresh strength into the scale
With that inspiring gesture, Baji came
Towards him singling out the lofty crest,
The princely form: and, as the waves divide
Before a driving keel, the battle so
Before him parted, till he neared, he slew.
Avoiding sword, avoiding lifted arm
The blade surprised the Rajput's throat, and down
As falls an upright poplar, with his hands
Outspread, dying, he clutched Mahratta ground.

The Rajput battle reeled back, and in their place the Pathan infantry advanced, trying to exhaust the mountaineers; and though even they could not make much headway, Baji's men felt themselves hard put to it because of their ever diminishing ammunition. But a brief pause ensued upon the recoil of the Pathans, the Mogul generals having grown doubtful whether

to persist or to withdraw with whatever men had survived the dreadful carnage. They, however, resolved to make a final dash. This time it was not Pathans or Rajputs who came forward,

But Agra's chivalry glancing with gold
And scimitars inlaid and coloured robes.
Swiftly they came expecting the assault
Fire-winged of bullets and the lethal rain,
But silence met them and to their intent
So ominous it seemed, a while they paused,
Fearing some ruse, though for much death prepared,
Yet careful of prevention.

Reassured, they climbed up, crossing unhurt the open space till they reached almost the top; but they were surprised by merciless swords and lances from behind bushes where the Southron few had concealed themselves. The battle grew apace, the latter holding their own by dint of breathless skill; then suddenly Baji found himself in the grip of one of those abnormal religious exaltations which used to be the mysterious spring of Shivaji's most brilliant military adventures.

Upon the Prabhou all the Goddess came.
Loud like a lion hungry on the hills
He shouted, and his stature seemed to increase
Striding upon the foe. Rapid his sword
Like lightning playing with a cloud made void
The crest before him, on his either side
The swordsmen of the South with swift assault
Preventing the reply, till like a bank
Of some wild river the assault collapsed
Over the stumbling edge and down the rise,

And once again the desperate moment passed.
The relics of the murderous strife remained,
Corpses and jewels, broidery and gold.
But not for this would they accept defeat.
Once more they came and almost held. Then wrath
Rose in the Prabhou and he raised himself
In soul to make an end; but even then
A stillness fell upon his mood and all
That godlike impulse faded from his heart,
And passing out of him a mighty form
Stood visible, Titanic, scarlet-clad,
Dark as a thunder-cloud with streaming air
Obscuring heaven, and in her sovran grasp
The sword, the flower, the boon, the bleeding head,—
Bhavani. Then she vanished; the daylight
Was ordinary in a common world.
And Baji knew the goddess formidable
Who watches over India till the end.
Even then a sword found out his shoulder, sharp
A Mogul lance ran griding through his arm...

But the day was saved; for as he still fought, surrounded
by the last few of his comrades, he saw a wave of cavalry
plunge forth from the direction of Raigurh. And before he fell
dead in a culminating grapple with the odds against him in the
unconquered gorge, he heard friendly horsehooves ring upon
the rocks behind,

And in a quick disordered stream, appalled,
The Mogul rout began. Sure-footed, swift
The hostile strength pursued, Suryaji first
Shouting aloud and singing to the hills
A song of Ramdas as he smote and slew.

But Shivaji by Baji's empty frame
 Stood silent and his gaze was motionless
 Upon the dead. Tanaji Malsurè
 Stood by him and observed the breathless corpse,
 Then slowly said, "Thirty and three the gates
 By which thou enterest heaven, thou fortunate soul,
 Thou valiant heart. So when my hour arrives,
 May I too clasp my death, saving the land
 Or winning some great fortress for my lord."

About a dozen lines more complete this poem, Sri Aurobindo's greatest contribution to the patriotic literature of his country. A true epic in every syllable, it shows one more side of its creator's powerful versatility, and together with *Love and Death* makes us anxious to have more of his blank verse, especially as it is an open secret that he keeps guarded with him treasures more royal than any he has hitherto shared with the public. For what the public has been privileged to have is mostly work done long ago, the first few fruits of his genius, all the maturest abundance of its spontaneity and skill lying still unpublished in the desk of the Yogi indifferent to fame.

Even that little, however, is enough to make us repeat Dryden's famous eulogium of Chaucer: "Here is God's plenty." And the expression takes on a special hue of meaning when we turn to another class of poems from his pen, which are devoted to embodying a more explicitly spiritual outlook and inlook. The first portents of his subsequent self-consecration to Yoga, they are illustrative in part of the ideal he later enunciated in the pages of his philosophical monthly, *Arya*, that Art can never really find what it seeks or succeed in liberating its soul in the highest perfection of speech unless it transfuses the rhythms of its exquisite moods into a sustained spiritual experience. English literature has not been utterly barren in

this kind of direct revelatory speech; here and there the veil has been lustrously rent, but there has been no secure possession of the *mantra*, the innermost utterance of the divine in humanity. For, a dangerous pitfall always lies in wait for the poet who aspires to discover a higher significance and purpose in the universe than the outward phenomenal suggestions which lie all around—intellectualisation of the artistic motive. Wordsworth is the standard example of the slow stiffening of the impulse of song towards the suprasensuous; for unless a centre of vision is reached and possessed beyond the mere ideative mind, poetry is likely, in its endeavour to express the first principles of things, to get hardened into metrical metaphysics, so that instead of the great moving rhythms and transparencies of the inner heart we get only the dry light of reason, indeed shedding occasionally some profitable radiance when it falls upon too stormy a billow of feeling, but by itself quite unfruitful because it attempts to interpret as a universe of logical discourse what is really a manifold strain of eternal music.

The only way of escape is either to remain secure in the mid-regions of aesthetic thought and passion if the wings of inspiration are too Icarian to bear the luminous pressure of supernatural motives, or to make a bold dash towards the golden gates and invoke their guardians not with the ordinary categorising brain-mind or the troubled desire-ridden emotional nature but with the true soul, the true psyche which has an ever-present contact with the spiritual meaning of the world. There is room, no doubt, for stately philosophic verse, a rising to the height of spiritual argument on the steps of apparently intellectual language, provided a strong impassioned soul-significance is supporting the mental process. In some of his poems Sri Aurobindo gives us such utterance, but they are not his most insistent revelations. When he wants to bring home to us some eternal verity from its mysterious abode of light,

he speaks in a tone which has in it either a sublime simplicity which renders clear a profound truth by a few striking images, or a direct imaginative force which without needing to bring in abundant colour can create for us a self-sufficient mystical symbol or atmosphere, or else a puissant intuitive luminosity which wears form and name only as a concession to the weakness of human mentality but imparts in a subtle unanalysable manner a sense of some beatific vastitude of ultimate creative Idea.

Here, for example, is a piece of supreme wisdom irresistible in its childlike appeal to the soul:

Thou who pervadest all the worlds below,
 Yet sitst above,
 Master of all who work and rule and know,
 Servant of Love!

Thou who disdainest not the worm to be
 Nor even the clod,
 Therefore we know by that humility
 That Thou art God.

In the same simple strain but with a greater breath of melody are these stanzas of spiritual intoxication:

We will tell the whole world of His ways and His cunning:
 He has rapture of torture and passion and pain;
 He delights in our sorrow and drives us to weeping,
 Then lures with His joy and His beauty again.

All music is only the sound of His laughter,
 All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss;
 Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
 Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.

He is strength that is loud in the blare of the trumpets,
And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;
He slays without stint and is full of compassion;
He wars for the world and its ultimate years...

A mixture of unaffected sublimity and tense Vedantic atmosphere is achieved in the opening verses of *In the Moonlight*:

If now must pause the bullocks' jingling tune,
Here let it be beneath the dreaming trees
Supine and huge that hang upon the breeze,
Here in the wide eye of the silent moon.

How living a stillness reigns! The night's hushed rules
All things obey but three, the slow wind's sigh
Among the leaves, the cricket's ceaseless cry,
The frog's harsh discord in the ringing pools.

Yet they but seem the silence to increase
And dreadful wideness of the inhuman night.
The whole hushed world immeasurable might
Be watching round this single spot of peace.

So boundless is the darkness and so rife
With thoughts of infinite reach that it creates
A dangerous sense of space and abrogates
The wholesome littleness of human life.

As an instance of direct imaginative symbolisation of a supra-sensuous experience, there can be scarcely anything more magical than the little gem called *Revelation*:

Someone leaping from the rocks
Past me ran with wind-blown locks

Like a startled bright surmise
Visible to mortal eyes,—
Just a cheek of frightened rose
That with sudden beauty glows,
Just a footstep like the wind
And a hurried glance behind,
And then nothing,—as a thought
Escapes the mind ere it is caught.
Someone of the heavenly rout
From behind the veil ran out.

This language of pure sight is carried up into what we have called intuitive luminosity and power when Sri Aurobindo confronts, as many a poet has done before, the rush and tumult of the sea: there is, therefore, something in it which leaves the most exalted rhetoric of Byron far behind as pallid and superficial just as much as it makes the most grandiose and colourful of Swinburne's alliterative chants mere sound and fury, incomplete in genuine vision and unsatisfying to the divine deeps of the soul. It is the physical natural sea that is apostrophised at the start but the voice which thus hails it comes from some profundity within and instantly the physical melts into a symbol, the merciless assault of the boundless waters becoming the great challenge of pain and peril to the advancing spirit in the world, and the whole poem ends on a note of heroic self-assertion of the hidden infinite in man against the infinite of circumstance which he has to fight and conquer, fathoming all its dangerous possibilities before he can come into his own as an incarnate godhead.

O grey wild sea,
Thou hast a message, thunderer, for me.
Their huge wide backs
Thy monstrous billows raise, abysmal cracks

Dug deep between.
One pale boat flutters over them, hardly seen.
I hear thy roar
Call me, "Why dost thou linger on the shore
With fearful eyes
Watching my tops visit their foam-washed skies?
This trivial boat
Dares my vast battering billows and can float.
Death if it find,
Are there not many thousands left behind?
Dare my wide roar,
Nor cling like cowards to the easy shore.
Come down and know
What rapture lives in danger and o'erthrow."
Yes, thou great sea,
I am more mighty and outbellow thee.
On thy tops I rise;
'Tis an excuse to dally with the skies.
I sink below
The bottom of the clamorous world to know.
On the safe land
To linger is to lose what God has planned
For man's wide soul,
Who set eternal godhead for its goal.
Therefore He arrayed
Danger and difficulty like seas and made
Pain and defeat,
And put His giant snares around our feet.

The cloud He informs
 With thunder and assails us with His storms,
 That man may grow
 King over pain and victor of o'erthrow
 Matching his great
 Unconquerable soul with adverse Fate.
 Take me, be
 My way to climb the heavens, thou rude great sea.
 I will seize thy mane,
 O lion, I will tame thee and disdain;
 Or else below
 Into thy salt abysmal caverns go,
 Receive thy weight
 Upon me and be stubborn as my Fate.
 I come, O Sea,
 To measure my enormous self with thee.

It is evident that something of the amplitude and energy of the ancient Upanishads is here caught and it is this style which gives us perhaps the clearest prevision of what the hitherto unpublished works of Sri Aurobindo must be having of quintessential royalty of pace. Majestic beyond conception must indeed be the full utterance of which we have once again a portent in the scriptural magnificence of *The Rishi*, the longest among his shorter poems. It is no piece of hyperbole to affirm that at least in the first hundred and nineteen lines of it we have a poetic phenomenon to which there is in certain respects no parallel. The famous close of Crashaw's *Flaming Heart* may have greater colour in its rocket-like leap into the heaven of heavens, Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* may be richer and more varied in the roll of its harmony towards the vision splendid, *The Hound of*

Heaven may carry itself on a more passionate torrent of religious imagery, but to see language stride like an imperturbable Colossus from pinnacle to pinnacle of thought stark, as it were, against Eternity we must listen to the colloquy which took place when King Manu in the former ages of the world, during which the Arctic continent still subsisted, sought knowledge from the Rishi of the Pole:

MANU

Rishi who trance-held on the mountains old
 Art slumbering, void
Of sense or motion, for in the spirit's hold
 Of unalloyed
Immortal bliss thou dream'st protected! Deep
 Let my voice glide
Into thy dumb retreat and break that sleep
 Abysmal. Hear!
The frozen snows that heap thy giant bed
 Ice-cold and clear,
The chill and desert heavens above thee spread
 Vast, austere,
Are not so sharp but that thy warm limbs brook
 Their bitter breath,
Are not so wide as thy immense outlook
 On life and death:
Their vacancy thy silent mind and bright
 Outmeasureth.
But ours are blindly active and thy light
 We have forgone.

RISHI

Who art thou, warrior armèd gloriously
 Like the sun?

Thy gait is as an empire and thine eye
Dominion.

MANU

King Manu, of the Aryan peoples lord,
Greets thee Sage.

RISHI

I know thee, King, earth to whose sleepless sword
Was heritage.
The high Sun's distant glories gave thee forth
On being's edge.
Where the slow skies of the auroral North
Lead in the morn
And flaring dawns for ever on heaven's verge
Wheel and turn,
Thundering remote the clamorous Arctic surge
Saw thee born.
There 'twas thy lot these later Fates to build,
This race of man
New-fashion. O watcher with the mountains wild,
The icy plain,
Thee I too, asleep, have watched, both when the Pole
Was brightening wan
And when like a wild beast the darkness stole
Prowling and slow
Alarming with its silent march the soul.
O King, I know
Thy purpose; for the vacant ages roll
Since man below
Conversed with God in friendship. Thou, reborn

For men perplexed,
Seekest in this dim aeon and forlorn
With evils vexed
The vanished light. For like this Arctic land
Death has annexed
To sleep, our being's summits cold and grand
Where God abides,
Repel the tread of thought. I too, O King,
In winds and tides
Have sought Him, and in armies thundering,
And where Death strides
Over whole nations. Action, thought and peace
Were questioned, sleep
And waking, but I had no joy of these,
Nor ponderings deep,
And pity was not sweet enough, nor good
My will could keep.
Often I found Him for a moment, stood
Astonished, then
It fell from me. I could not hold the bliss,
The force for men,
My brothers. Beauty ceased my heart to please,
Brightness in vain
Recalled the vision of the light that glows
Suns behind:
I hated the rich fragrance of the rose;
Weary and blind,
I tired of the suns and stars; then came
With broken mind
To heal me of the rash devouring flame,
The dull disease,
And sojourned with this mountain's summits bleak,
These frozen seas.

King, the blind dazzling snows have made me meek,
Cooled my unease,
Pride could not follow, nor the restless will
Come and go;
My mind within grew holy, calm and still
Like the snow.

MANU

O thou who wast with chariots formidable
And with the bow!
Voiceless and white the cold unchanging hill,
Has it then
A mightier presence, deeper mysteries
Than human men?
The warm low hum of crowds, towns, villages,
The sun and rain,
The village maidens to the water bound,
The happy herds,
The fluting of the shepherd lads, the sound
Myriad of birds,
Speak these not clearer to the heart, convey
More subtle words?
Here is but great dumb night, an awful day
Inert and dead.

RISHI

The many's voices fill the listening ear,
Distract the head:
The One is silence; on the snows we hear
Silence tread.

And so onward the mighty argument proceeds. The rest of the poem is not exactly on the same level, but it suffers only in comparison with its own commencement; for the whole makes one of the very rare pieces for which, if at all so unpleasant a bargain were to be struck, one might even exchange the twelve Upanishads. Their revelatory force is here focussed to inspire the word of the highest wisdom. For indeed the Rishi's final message is not bare asceticism and Nirvana, but Sri Aurobindo's own insistence on manifesting both in life and art a world of values "beyond the mind's imagining", a transcendent status to which Yoga alone possesses the key. After puzzling King Manu with conflicting sides of Yogic knowledge, he reassures him in fine of the utility of all human work and aspiration; for, the great Unknown is no immutable void but an utter fullness—only, its ineffable secrecies of a more abundant life are lodged in the bosom of a peace which passes the ordinary understanding. It is by rising to it that man, spiritualised, can achieve completeness; it is also by entering into sustained communion with that highest Consciousness that, in Sri Aurobindo's view, a poet can taste most satisfyingly of the fountains of true creative art and help to raise up humanity to the Divine. For, in poetry, according to Sri Aurobindo, there is an upward evolution of its powers and at its summit the highest function of sound is to instil in the listener the poet's experience of a Truth that is behind all things, its significances in themselves beyond word and thought finding expression through an inner silence, and to lift him rapt, spellbound, dazzled into sudden awareness of that wondrous supreme Beauty and Delight which elude normal perception, a high-uplifted Beauty and Delight sustaining magically the cosmic process. In the cosmic process, Matter, Life, Mind and Soul are intended to arrive at a progressive expression of this Truth of themselves, this all-sustaining Beauty, which are already existent in the supramental as

a perfect harmony of ideal realities, and poetry thus raised to a supreme Light and Force can powerfully assist towards that consummation. If, therefore, the possibilities of the poet of the future are to come to their utmost fruition, his art, whether it flowers forth in the lyric cry or the narrative, in the drama or the epic, should not merely be an instrument of forces which work through him by passing inspirations. It must represent the continuous rhythm of an inner life in which the meaning of the universe shall be unfolded in the individual and the Spirit manifested, with constant integrality, even through the prose of daily intercourse with the world.

SRI AUROBINDO — POET OF YOGA*

Sri Aurobindo is always a call to spiritual adventure. To read his recent poetry is like walking on the edge of a precipice. One gets intoxicated with heights, one feels dizzy with depths, and it is with an effort that one manages to breathe the keen air and keep a clear head. A vision is lit, an experience takes shape, which are difficult to connect with the familiar contours of life. The critic, therefore, is liable to miss the true impact of this poetry, the right suggestion of each austere or colourful line. Most critics will go astray because the self-expression of a supreme Master of Yoga cannot be measured by the rules-of-thumb by which books of verse are reviewed, even religious or idealistic verse. Not that the criteria of poetry in general are inapplicable to it or that the religious or idealistic seeker will find no point of contact with its theme. Sri Aurobindo has chosen a form of art as his instrument and so it is as a poet no less than as a mystic that he should be judged. But his mysticism transcends the religious aim of giving mere mental and emotional “uplift” and the idealistic purpose of firing the imagination with far-away beauty. Sri Aurobindo writes of things he has actually seen and known : his poetry is the revealing word of realities that are supernormal to our mind but close and concrete to the subtle sense of the Yogi. To feel the power of such an inspiration we must bring an intense aesthesis free of old ideas and tempos, we must cultivate a profound sympathetic insight. Else we shall tack on labels that hang most oddly, pick out affinities and differences with a superficial eye and altogether shoot wide of the living soul, the passionate uniqueness of this work.

* First published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* (Calcutta, 1942), as a review of two books: *Six Poems* (1934) and *Poems* (1941).

As if it were not enough to write from a range of experience beyond the common, Sri Aurobindo has turned his hand in nine out of these twelve poems to novel verse-forms. He has based his technique on a flexible modulation of classical quantitative foot measures or on a combination of stress and foot striking a many-sided mean between free verse and traditional metre. There are short but instructive notes to one of the books; their absence in the other makes somewhat of a *lacuna* for full technical appraisal.¹ Luckily, it is not necessary to know the technique in detail for getting the *rasa* of the new movement. A driving force is felt in the expression which assures success in whatever novel pattern Sri Aurobindo chooses to cut. The poems have a pulse of their own and convey like an organic body their peculiar gait. Nothing is eked out with brain-labour to fit a preconceived framework; the inspiration seems to be skilful by a luminous instinct taking liberties with the base and achieving a “happy valiancy” impossible to intellectual experiment. In fact, brain-labour is absent in the very nature of this poetry. Sri Aurobindo writes from centres of consciousness which Yogic practice discovers behind the mind in occult regions and above it in a sort of spiritual ether. This brings in, apart from the technical novelty, an unusual rhythm which is a rarer enchantment, a more momentous adventure than any new and fascinating form. Rhythm, in poetry, is not the mere harmonious arrangement of sounds; it is sound suggesting the hidden life-throb of a thing as felt by a certain mode of consciousness. As long as the mode is one that is accessible to the majority of people every fresh sweep of poetic rhythm goes home to the heart. When an extraordinary mode comes into play, the aesthetic ear needs special tuning in order to catch the whole gamut.

¹ When the books were included in *Collected Poems and Plays*, the absence was made good.—K.D.S., 1970.

Emily Dickinson, referring to the physical effect poetry had on her, says, "It is as if the top of my head were taken off!" Her description applies most appropriately to Sri Aurobindo's work. The wind of his inspiration gives us the feeling that our brain-clamped mind has lost its limits and that it functions in a powerful immensity fraught with unfathomable suggestions. The rhythm fills out the meaning to a tense mystery breaking into a largeness of inner experience which is distinct both from the Classically Sublime and the Romantically Stupendous known to poetry so far. We have a grandeur of sense and sound *sui generis*. Take the line :

Calm faces of the gods on backgrounds vast.

The word-picture is of a steady watchful agelessness, but that is not all: the very life of that Super-Nature, that amplitude self-aware, is breathed into the long varying vowels and subtly alliterative consonants. Here is another instance :

My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight.

The actual process of the human enlarging itself into the Divine is conveyed both by the suggestive phrases and the rhythm with its leaping yet massive, vigorous yet poised movement of anapaests. Or consider a verse like

Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,

where what would otherwise be abstract springs into concreteness because of the vitality of each accurate word, a vitality echoing the very act of a high spiritual realisation, so deeply and intimately does the whole line vibrate in our consciousness.

It is not easy to grasp the essential nature of this rhythm.

Nothing short of constant brooding over such lines as I have quoted and intoning them to some inner ear can create the true response. All fine poetry must be lived with a long while for the entire bulk of beauty behind its first surprise to be assimilated; work like Sri Aurobindo's demands a keener concentration. Critical analysis will not be enough : we must more than understand, we must get hypnotically haunted, so to speak, until our outward-going faculties develop a supernormal perception. We have to grow both aesthetically and intuitively. To facilitate this growth we cannot do better than make a cult of the new inspiration by repeating and revolving within ourselves as often as possible that magnificent quatrain from *The Life Heavens* which gives the ideal at once of Sri Aurobindo's askesis and art, the aim of his Integral Yoga and an example of what the best spiritual poetry should be :

Arms taking to a voiceless supreme delight,
 Life that meets the Eternal with close breast,
 An unwall'd mind dissolved in the Infinite,
 Force one with unimaginable rest.

Here we have the Vedas and the Upanishads and the Gita in miraculous quintessence. No other poet has caught the overtones and undertones of the ancient Indian scriptures with the sustained potency that in these four lines turns the etherealities of religion and idealism into an immediate and palpable greatness. Perhaps in their rarest flights Milton and Wordsworth have captured something similar, but there is in these verses by Sri Aurobindo a continuity, a completeness, an all roundness, an exhaustive loftiest expression of the truth of our whole nature—our body, our vital and emotional being, our thought-urge, our will-energy—a foursquare triumph of the spiritual *mantra* which arrests and satisfies us more than any accidental aspect of it in splendid isolation like

Those thoughts that wander through Eternity

from *Paradise Lost* or that sudden

Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone—

which is itself a very lonely voyager through much watery verse in *The Prelude*.

The *mantra* ! Whether scattered or built into a consistent pattern, it is the goal of mystical poetry. It occurs under special conditions in which the psychological standpoint of the writer undergoes a change. To speak eloquently of God's knowledge or his marvellous power is not necessarily to embody that power or that knowledge: everything depends on what "plane" of being has found expression. Every plane has its own voice, its own spontaneous manner of utterance. A vivid quivering nerve-poignancy and passion is Shakespeare, the plane of the Life Force *par excellence*. Milton is a less vibrant play with our guts but a more resounding impact on our grey cells, the plane of the Mind Force raised to its climax. Beyond these forces are other planes: there the basis of all experience is the Infinite and the Immortal—there a supreme Oneness underlying all diversity is the first fact of conscious existence—and consciousness there is not a logical or imaginative attempt to reconstruct truth but a direct entry into the essence of things: thought and its labour are no more, a swift blissful intuition radiates everywhere, with a harmonious surge exceeding the poetic possibilities of our lesser light. If that expressive amplitude is permitted to take hold of our speech, we get a combination of sounds and a turn of phrase and a glow of insight which carry the inmost "feel" of those divine heights. The vision, the word, the vibration—all three must be intensities drawn from the Spirit's ether. But more even than the wide inwardness of the vision,

the mighty yet intimate grip of the word, it is the rhythm that marks the *mantra*, bearing as it does the precise thrill of a Consciousness which is everlasting and unlimited. Without such a thrill there would be just a distant glimpse of the Promised Land in admirable poetry of its own kind but no sensation of the Spirit's vastnesses as though they were within us. For that sensation and the concrete insight it brings, the mind must surrender its tongue to the luminous Beyond instead of essaying an imitation by means of its own heat and movement. To do this in any extensive measure calls for a patient and quiet aesthetic Yoga in tune with an actual practice of self-consecration to the Divine. Even then, what is achieved may not be the utter *mantra*, for there are fine gradations, each a power of the Spirit and the sheer top is the mantric miracle. But Sri Aurobindo has again and again the breath of the sheer top. And when he descends, it is mainly to the other altitudes of Super-Nature: almost throughout the tones of the Over-world blow through his music.

An exceptional and unprecedented feat, this—but on being shown the new accent people blink and wonder what all the gorgeous frenzy is about. Unable to make much of his significance at the first blush they start comparing its language and its rhythm to those of older poets in order to arrive at some coign of vantage from which to get the right perspective. But, as I have indicated, the real affinities are such rare birds that the results of the comparison are generally ludicrous. Surface impressions are accepted without the least endeavour to dig below them. If the lines lengthen out and a richness of colour is employed, the cry of "Swinburne!" is raised. The temper of the poem is not even touched, the metrical design is not analysed. The fact that Sri Aurobindo has moulded novel metrical designs and royally filled them with inspiration adds, in the opinion of dilettante critics, a further resemblance to Swinburne

the arch-metricist. Never a thought is spared for the basic distinctions between the various moulds or the expressive purposes to which they are put. What completes and crowns the huge confusion is that Sri Aurobindo's soar of mystical and spiritual vision beyond the range familiar to the imagination is taken to be half-brother of Swinburne's frequent vagueness and tenuity of substance! Not invariably does Sri Aurobindo soar a little beyond our comprehension; but whenever he tends to do so, there is no melodious thinness of thought, there is only a thrilled transcendence of thought by pure spiritual revelation. What, for instance, is decoratively inane in the pictorial profundity of a vision such as

Gold-white wings a throb in the vastness, the bird of flame
 went glimmering over a sunfire curve to the haze of the
west,
 Skimming, a messenger-sail, the sapphire-summer waste
 of a soundless wayless burning sea—

or in the opulent symbolism charging the deep tone of this passage about the same occult bird:

White-ray-jar of the spuming rose-red wine drawn from the
 vats brimming with light-blaze, the vats of ecstasy,
 Pressed by the sudden and violent feet of the Dancer in
 Time from his sun-grape fruit of a deathless vine—

or, again, in the psychic tension as well as unearthly magic and mystery of another glimpse from the bird-apocalypse:

Rich and red is thy breast, O bird, like blood of a soul
 climbing the hard crag-teeth world, wounded and nude,
 A ruby of flame-petalled love in the silver-gold altar-vase
 of moon-edged night and rising day.

The least sensitiveness on our part to great occult verse is enough to convince us that we are in the presence of a reality belonging to other planes of being than the physical. The inward vibrancy of an experience moving between some hidden heart of spirituality in us and some subtle ether above our mind is caught undeniably by the aesthetic sense, and when the whole poem is read we feel that sweep after sweep of an artist's brush has carried us in a multi-gestured scheme to a grand total out of the scope of articulate expression. *The Bird of Fire* is not a heaping up of half-vivid half-vague effects—it is one whole, and at the end there is no impression of an inadequate stammer. The light and leap of individual pictures come to a profound rest, a composed fullness packed with spiritual substance; only, the substance cannot be altogether grasped by the understanding. All poetry has an unresolved surplus, something that defies mental analysis, a suggestive aura beyond words. Mystical poetry lifts this surplus to its largest intensity: the failure, therefore, of the understanding to cope with the strange details and the stranger *ensemble* does not measure the incompetence of the mystic's art. The sole question we have to put is: Has the poetry everywhere a breath of life and does that breath form a harmony satisfying some intuitive awareness within us?

What strengthens our feeling of a harmony in each poem by Sri Aurobindo is the firm unfaltering manner in which the lines grow. No weakness, no hurry—but a sure and moulded progression even in the midst of speed; there is no myopic peering into mists nor an embranglement among depths as though his mind were alien to them. Sri Aurobindo moves like a master through the Unknown, with a grip on all that he describes: the poetry has an objective three-dimensional air as if the Spirit were neither an abstraction nor a far-floating haze but something to be seen and touched. The peculiarity, however, is that the universe in which Sri Aurobindo sees and touches reality

is held in a wideness of being that is his own self—the objective and the subjective are a single strangeness. The impression that harmonious worlds of light are his theme and that he possesses whatever he wants to manifest and does not fumble for it distinguishes his poetry at its most puzzling from the discords and chaotic fantasies of the Surrealist School. The surrealist stumbles through a world of jostling phantasms, chunks of colour and imagery laid on one another as in a nightmare. All kinds of wayward combinations are projected and there is an amorphous look about the entire mass. Sri Aurobindo is always the artist seer, the shaper building beauty out of a spaciousness lit up within him. The seeing eye and the shaping hand are evident whether he writes quantitative trimeters with a broad clarity of stroke as in the first half of *Shiva*—

A face on the cold dire mountain peaks
 Grand and still; its lines white and austere
 Match with the unmeasured snowy streaks
 Cutting heaven, implacable and sheer.

Above it a mountain of matted hair
 Aeon-coiled on that deathless and lone head
 In its solitude huge of lifeless air
 Round, above illimitably spread.

A moon-ray on the forehead, blue and pale,
 Stretched afar its finger of strange light
 Illumining emptiness. Stern and male
 Mask of peace indifferent in might!—

or colour and splendour are drawn from realms of the occult as in *Rose of God* where a famous symbol is steeped in the most intense spiritual light possible and lifted on a metrical base of

pure stress into an atmosphere of rapt incantation. Each poem of Sri Aurobindo's must be read with a slow full voice in order to get its true rhythmic value: not indeed a dreamy drawl but an intensity that is controlled and deep-vowelling. Read thus, with the mind held quiet and receptive, Sri Aurobindo wafts to us in this apostrophe the breath of an unforgettable experience:

Rose of God, vermillion stain on the sapphires of heaven,
 Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies
 seven!

Leap up in our heart of humanhood, O miracle, O flame,
 Passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name.

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being,
 Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing!
 Live in the mind of our earthhood; O golden Mystery, flower,
 Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous
 Hour.

Rose of God, damask force of Infinity, red icon of might,
 Rose of Power with thy diamond halo piercing the night!
 Ablaze in the will of the mortal, design the wonder of thy
 plan,
 Image of Immortality, outbreak of the Godhead in man.

Rose of God, smitten purple with the incarnate divine Desire,
 Rose of Life, crowded with petals, colour's lyre!
 Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and magical
 rhyme;
 Bridge our earthhood and heavenhood, make deathless the
 Children of Time.

Rose of God, like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,

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Rose of Love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of Grace!
Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's
abyss:
Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's
kiss.

This is not decorative art, splashing oriental hues and luxuriating in exotic effects for their own sake. Every phrase is plucked from the gorgeous heart of a spiritual ecstasy, every word is dyed in the life-blood of genuine mysticism. Nor is there anything haphazard, a welter of vividnesses. A balance is retained in the midst of intoxication and step by step the rapture is explored. Esoteric, no doubt, some of the expressions are, but they come to us like the actual sight of unknown yet undeniable objects. They are esoteric as the amazing actuality of the Aurora Borealis may be called esoteric when viewed by a traveller from southern latitudes to North Cape. What is more, we feel that the lights in the poem are a burst of secret significance—the vibrant imagery wakes in us an intuition of glorious purposes at work. To miss the sense of a divine reality that is borne on the profoundly moving language and rhythm and to say that we are face to face with abstractions covered by ornate phraseology is to be deaf and blind and numb.

The Infinite, the Eternal, the Divine—these are not in mystical poetry philosophical abstractions. A certain philosophical air is bound to cling at times to whatever deals with things so remote from our day-to-day concerns. But it is only the most superficial who will assert that Sri Aurobindo has juggled with mere ideas and rendered them attractive with the help of images. Words like “vastness”, “immensity”, “timeless”, “illimitable” and their equivalents scattered throughout his poetry do not stamp it as an intellectual exercise. Such words are an aid to the art that seeks to embody Yogic states of consciousness.

Apart from monotony, the pitfall to avoid is insincerity and rhetoric—the hollow Hugoesque shout. In poetry that is deeply felt, these so-called abstractions live in the inner being, they create a sort of powerful subjective space—for vision to fill and illuminate. Vision—the seizing of actual presences and their interplay, the contacting of the shape and tint of hidden realities—turns Sri Aurobindo's work into a revelatory process. But to appreciate the revelation, one must keep in mind that Sri Aurobindo is treading the domain of the superhuman, the ultra-natural, and his aim is not to humanise and naturalise them altogether. Indeed poetry of a fine order is possible to a completely humanised and naturalised mysticism as in the lyrics of the Vaishnava devotees, yet such verse is not the sole *genre* nor the acme of spiritual expression. A thing that is not of earth becomes more authentic and vivid if viewed in its own native atmosphere and setting than if tamed to the needs of the outer eye and the established habits of the poetic imagination. Sri Aurobindo, however, does not indulge in fantasy: a fidelity to mystical fact constitutes his "strangeness". Nor is mystical fact cold and ghostly. In the atmosphere and setting of the Beyond we do not meet a passionless pageant of strange forms on the verge of dissolving into a void. All human emotions are carried up, stripped of their brief pleasures and small pains, kindled into what the old Rishis called *ānanda* and rested in a supreme single-lustred fullness or made to clasp the contents of a beatific cosmos. Poems like *Jivanmukta*, *Nirvana* and *Thought the Paraclete* which manifest superhuman states are not frigid—they burn in an aura of beatitude. They are the music of sovereign God-realisation, not of aching and thwarted desire for the Infinite. Feeling, passion, emotion—all are there, but in a massive, harmonious, full-flowered intensity—they are not slashed and smitten to tuneful shreds.

Variously the genius of Sri Aurobindo brings home that

intense height and breadth. A style not confined to one formula of symbolisation but cast into a changing chiaroscuro makes the two booklets of his recent poetry a many-faceted pointer to a new art fulfilling what is at present a dim tendency in the race mind. Not always is Sri Aurobindo the esoteric artist: he can also conjure up a picture whose significance is caught by us immediately—

...poised on the unreachable abrupt snow-solitary ascent
Earth aspiring lifts to the illimitable Light, then ceases
broken and spent.

But we are moved quite as much by more mysterious figurations.

...the dragon tail aglow of the faint night

brings us the sense of a power stretched gigantically in the darkness and laying on our minds a living touch through the swirl of stars. The sheer occult confronts us when Sri Aurobindo speaks of Shiva's creative force stirring within the core of Spirit merged in unconscious Matter:

In that diamond heart the fires undrape.

The finality of each word burns itself into the memory. "Undrape", with its hint of processes at once revelatory and creative, could not be bettered. The epithet "diamond" too is worth noting for its double felicity: not only is it true to the inner sight to which the Divine's will is a tremendous white lustre just as the Divine's knowledge is a gold blaze and the Divine's love a crimson flare—it is also extraordinarily apt when the Spirit concealed in Matter is visioned, a presence holding mate-

rial rigidity in a precious and transfigured form, a supreme strength dense with light and beauty. An equal art is employed in a different manner where the hint is of an absolute leap of the soul beyond the narrow paradises that often sidetrack the Yogi's passage through the inner planes:

My consciousness climbed like a topless hill.

The line suggests vividly a straight ascension that never comes to a culminating point because what it explores is the Infinite unfolding expanse after expanse. The suggestion is unlike religious or metaphysical poetry of the past by being couched in a language and a rhythm that somehow impart a direct intimate sense of the Ultra-natural. Whatever the style, this intimate directness is everywhere brought to us by Sri Aurobindo. But it is at its most effective when it carries those large unfathomable reverberations which rise into the *mantra* and which he calls "overhead" because the afflatus then is a power felt in Yogic experience to be descending from above the mind-level in the brain.

The "overhead" afflatus is, among all inspirations, the most genuinely progressive: it is the sign of the next stage in our psychological evolution. It is like a message out of a future in which man's mind will not only plunge inward to his true psyche and from that spontaneous centre of light deepen into a majesty and a magnitude which is the secret Self of all things but also open upward to colossal powers of consciousness, a dynamic divinity taking up all our members and pouring into them the richest possible fulfilment of earth-existence. Strengthened by such a Yoga, poetry will no longer strain towards the Eternal in half-lit figures and a speech that carries a mere moiety of the Spirit's life-transmuting rhythm. Not that the new art will throw the achievement of past ages into the shade:

poetic excellence can be attained by the atheism of a Lucretius as well as by the Aurobindonian God-realisation, and nobody will ever outsing Valmiki and Homer and Shakespeare. But a new region of reality will be laid bare, untrodden expressive paths penetrated. While the former ages gave us something of the world's wonder as seized by the body-sense, the life-gusto, the mental aesthesis, there will be found in the future a poetic word equal to Homer and Shakespeare and Valmiki but packed with a superhuman awareness which is man's profoundest though as yet unrevealed truth of being and the archetype of his body, his vital force and his mind. Mystical verse can be written from any inner level—a contact with the Superhuman can be made when one goes anywhere below the surface; still, the inspiration that has the amplest and closest grip on the Divine is the "overhead". In Sri Aurobindo the "overhead" breath is seldom absent: at times it is just a touch upon more familiar strata of harmony—oftener it is a full sweep clearing

Channels of rapture opal and hyaline

For the influx of the Unknown and the Supreme.

His twelve recent poems, therefore, are a remarkable step forward in the realm of Art. Among his own performances, they are a royal prelude of short span to the epic on which he is famed to be at work—*Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*—the epic which will carry to its highest tempo and sustain at the greatest and most diverse length the type of poetry that the world's master-singers before Sri Aurobindo's day have created in a few rare moments.

THE WORLD OF SRI AUROBINDO'S POETRY*

AN INTRODUCTORY EXPLORATION UP TO *SAVITRI*

I

GREAT POETS OF OUR TIMES

Yeats, Rilke, Valéry, Bloc: these are the indisputable peaks of poetry the West has thrown up in our times. One may extend the roll by adding Jiménez who has been outshone in the public eye so far by that more picturesque, romantic and tragic-fated countryman of his, Lorca. Several others of a little later generation, with whom Lorca connects at some points, have had a more sensational success by their revolt against all tradition and their seizing mostly in contorted or bizarre image, in complicated and intellectualised idiom, in free semi-prose versification, what they regard as the characteristic chaos of modern life. But, though we may grant them a certain liberative utility at a particular stage of poetic history, their work, even when it has a keen newness and not just oddity or perversity, falls short of the revelation of both the intense and the immense which the older masters of poetic speech bring us in various styles.

Too much of the ingenious intellect, too frequent a prose-turn and too large a preoccupation with that layer of contemporary existence on which the chaotic is luridly real, cut across the subtle seeing and hearing which is the soul of the art of

* Adapted and expanded from an essay written in 1953 to go with a projected volume, *Selected Poetry of Sri Aurobindo*, and published a little later in *Mother India, Monthly Review of Culture*, Pondicherry.

poetry. They seem to clip again and again in even the most serious, most symbol-charged compositions the wings of what Bloc calls the Spirit of Music throbbing not in calendar time but in an inner dimension of Nature's life and what Rilke figures as the Angelic Order in which, at once terrifying and enrapturing, resides the absolute of earthly song and towards which man should move by opening out of physical "World" into psychological "Space".

Valéry, whose thinking mind is analytic, agnostic, doubtful of norms and reluctant to subscribe to his teacher Mallarmé's aesthetic mysticism, is yet at one with Rilke and Bloc in the personality he unfolds in his poetry. He becomes a penetrating sorter of delicate psychological depths, a poised visionary of the secret founts of his own poetic self ecstatically emerging from a strange nothingness—"Harmonieuse Moi...Mysterieuse Moi." He never forgets that imaginative exaltation and sustained vibrant form are indispensable if great poetry is to be born. We may sacrifice rhetoric as well as fixity of structure and break down the fences erected by the old schools in regard to theme, but poetry must always be something that not merely puts into a different key what can be said in prose but also says what prose is not sufficiently tuned up to articulate.

Perhaps Jiménez in his disclosures of "the animal of the depth of air with wings that cannot fly in the air"—stringent, rarefied, evanescent disclosures depending so much on minute impetuosities and hesitations and shiftings of cadence and tone—illustrates this special function of poetry most quintessentially in certain aspects. It is illustrated too in another manner by the best product of a poet whom the so-called "modernists" often set at the centre of their cult in opposition to the bulk of verse in the past—passages of Eliot's *Four Quartets*: a fact rather curious, for, if we may judge by it, the less typically modernist a poem the more genuinely poetic it would appear to become. The

finest utterances in *Four Quartets*, like the lines about “being still and still moving” or those about “the moment in and out of time,” are not only broadly traditional—at the same time that they are personal—in their religious insight and urgency and akin to Rilke’s during some of his tensions of passionate prophetic loneliness: they are also embodied in a flexible verse which is not at all amorphous, haphazard and prosaic but very rhythmically patterned, often directly metrical though not many lines have the same number of feet and though there is a lot of modulation in those whose feet are equal. Among the poets of contemporary England, however, Yeats, while hardly so profound a seer as his friend AE, is the articulator *par excellence* of the suggestion and the feeling beyond prose. Even when in his later work he goes outside the wizard circle of the Celtic Twilight with its “sweet everlasting voices” and puts his hand on life as lived by flesh and blood among concrete challenges, takes for use words commonly spoken and finds room for many sides of his mind, he rarely loses the magical mood, the inspired no less than measured intonation.

In the East two names have stood high in our own day, one in Urdu and Persian by a dynamic colourful passion of religious thought, the other in Bengali by a deep and exquisitely imaged devotionism, and both by an intonation inspired and measured: Iqbal and Tagore. But there is a third that is coming more and more to the front—the sole Indian poet whom, as Francis Watson reported in a radio talk from England in 1951, Yeats had singled out as writing creatively in English. And this name is likely to be found, in a final assessment, to be in a class apart. Not that the purely poetic quality of those two or of the others we have listed is less, but profundities and amplitudes and heights of experience greater than any they command are compassed and there is a royal quantity of quality in excess of anything done by them. Face to face with a multi-

aspected spiritual epic like *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol*, with its nearly twenty-four thousand lines, we cannot help feeling the enormous stature of Sri Aurobindo. But, even outside this performance, we have before us an abundance of poetic creation which is out of the ordinary in merit.

To get him into proper focus we should mention also that his life covers a period of seventy-eight years: 1872-1950. Hence his contemporaneity is bound to be many-shaded. But here we must be free of several confusions. To be contemporary, a poet must not be expected to be, as some of the Victorians thought, the expressive channel of popular currents or, like the modernists, the mouthpiece of the exaggerations of his age. Fundamentally, to be contemporary can mean nothing more than to be, in every period of one's life, aware of the experience that is offered to one in ways never quite the same before. How much one stresses or does not stress the peculiar ways, how far one works within their terms or ranges outside them affects in no wise one's contemporaneity. Again, a poet's momentousness for his age (or for all history) is not determined by any of these factors. It depends on the meaning with which his attitude is fraught and, inasmuch as the meaning is an integral part of his poetry, on the art by which his matter and manner fuse and kindle up. Sri Aurobindo the poet has undoubtedly been contemporary in the fundamental sense and, in a good deal of his output, momentous. In certain respects, as we shall gather later, he is in the best sense a "futurist". Otherwise too, there is nothing to expose him, just because he is not a strict modernist nor exactly in the popular stream, to the charge of being tradition-bound, old-fashioned or remote from life. He would be vulnerable only if he were flabbily imitative or derivative, or immured in cloud-cuckoo fantasy, not if he took past forms and bent them to his own uses, chose past themes and infused them with a new significant vitality driving towards things to come, least of all if he plunged to bedrock spiritual purposes

and problems instead of getting mazed in superficial or else merely fashionable perplexities.

To overlook or underrate his poetic quality would be a misfortune for the lover of literature who is not confined by specific cults.

2

EARLY POEMS AND BLANK-VERSE NARRATIVES

Even in his juvenilia, written round about his twentieth year, Sri Aurobindo has at the same time a freshness and a finish, proving that from the beginning the artist went hand in hand with the visionary. Of course, the visioning is done by the heart of a youth and it is coloured by the temper of Romanticism which was inevitable in the eighties of the last century. But the blending of the rich with the graceful and shapely is an effect of the Greek and Latin Muse, in fervent dedication to whom the young Indian lived at Cambridge. Echoes and immaturities are not absent, but the inspired individual note is often struck. Thus *The Lover's Complaint*, which has the same subject as Virgil's Eighth Eclogue and treats of Damon's sad memories of Nysa who has been snatched away by the uncouth Mopsus, has in one stanza a most delightful originality. Where Virgil makes Damon say only that when he was a little lad of 10 and, along with his mother, plucking dewy apples from the lower boughs in a garden, he first saw Nysa and a fatal frenzy swept him off his feet, Sri Aurobindo adds a new turn to the story with a faint recollection of Sappho's "apple that reddens on the top branch" and concludes with a conceit of poignant whimsicality:

She asked for fruit long-stored in autumn's hold.
These gave I; from the branch dislodged I threw
Sweet-hearted apples in their age of gold
And pears divine for taste and hue.
And one I saw, should all the rest excel;
But error led my plucking hand astray
And with a sudden sweet dismay
My heart into her apron fell.

The wit, for all the occasional romantic embroidery, is Attic as well as Aurobindonian. And surely a snatch from the Greek Anthology meets us with yet a personal accent in the earth-wisdom of *A Doubt*:

Many boons the new years make us
But the old world's gifts were three,
Dove of Cypris, wine of Bacchus,
Pan's sweet pipe in Sicily.

Love, wine, song, the core of living
Sweetest, oldest, musicalest,
If at end of forward striving
These, Life's first, proved also best?

Then there is that translation from Meleager, *A Rose of Women*, which is worth comparing with F. L. Lucas's rendering. Sri Aurobindo writes :

Now lilies blow upon the windy height,
Now flowers the pansy kissed by tender rain,
Narcissus builds his house of self-delight
And Love's own fairest flower blooms again;
Vainly your gems, O meadows, you recall;
One simple girl breathes sweeter than you all.

Lucas's version is :

Now the white violet's blooming, and that lover of the showers,
 Narcissus, and the lilies go climbing up the hill,
 And now, delight of lovers, spring-flower among the flowers,
 Sweet Rose of Persuasion, blossoms my Zenophil.
 Ah meadows, vain your laughter, in vain your shining hair:
 Than all your fragrant garlands the lass I love, more fair.

Verbally, Lucas may be more faithful, but, though attractive, he is hardly as neat and compact with a happy balance between naturalness and artistry. To take one point in Sri Aurobindo: to say that "lilies blow" is absolutely natural, yet when they do so on "the windy height" we see the artistic felicity of the word "blow" rather than "bloom", which could have changed places with it here from line 4 : it is as if the lilies were fused with the winds and their odour were all over the height.

Nor is the youthful Sri Aurobindo locked up in a tower of ancient ivory. He has poems of a personal heartbeat, and his eyes are open to contemporary situations as his verses on Persia and Ireland show. The same modernism is astir in another piece, *The Lost Deliverer*, which begins with an allusion to Greek mythology but moves on to some dramatic development of the day. The subject is not very clear, but ignorance, on our part detracts in no way from the poem's force and fire, the grandeur, the irony, the tragedy of the drama summed up in perfect language :

Pythian he came; repressed beneath his heel
 The hydra of the world with bruised head.
 Vainly, since Fate's immeasurable wheel
 Could parley with a straw. A weakling sped

The bullet when to custom's usual night
We fell because a woman's faith was light.

The opening lines telescope two incidents of classical legend. Apollo is called Pythian because he slew the serpent Python which was tormenting the god's mother Latona, while the killer of the terrible Lernaean Hydra with the hundred heads was Hercules. A rare leader, enlightened and heroic, steps forth into view, but his charisma is counteracted by petty circumstances. The poem's style proves that the young Indian author did not confine himself to the exquisite in expression. The phrase in lines 2 and 3 about Fate's wheel and its parleying with a straw has an absolute magnificence condensing to a revelatory figure one of life's recurrent anomalies—events with world-wide import arrested in their course or deviated from it by small unexpected turns, some rash impulse or sudden frailty either of the main actor or of other characters involved with him. If one came across the phrase out of context, one would be inclined to grope for a Shakespearean source. It is as if the Bard had raised to the intensest pitch possible to him an insight taking brief shape with some linguistic affinity to his *Ancient Pistol's* fluent description—

cruel Fate

And giddy Fortune's furious fickle wheel—

as well as to his *Hamlet's* extended reflection—

Rightly to be great

Is not to stir without great argument,

But greatly to find quarrel in a straw

When honour's at the stake.

The closing line, too, about our falling by the lightness of a

woman's faith has a memorable finality in its semi-epigram. Here also we can feel not only a broad sweep of vision over *la condition humaine* but a kind of secret Shakespearean relish in the piquant posture of a large-scale down-dropping, as if "never to rise again", because of psychological "trifles light as air".

Felicitous in-look and a subtle strength of spirit are the repeated mark of Sri Aurobindo's poetry from the start and it grows increasingly keener and finer on the whole with the opening of his Europeanised mind, familiar with French, German and Italian no less than Greek and Latin, to the manifold opulence of his country's culture and life. The first result, before the century is out, is the composition of two narratives in blank verse, that most difficult of mediums in languages that have no very prominent formal support of "quantity" in their numbers. To Sri Aurobindo blank verse came with an inspired naturalness which some critics have compared with Milton's born hand for it. His style too has been called Miltonic. But if we accept the term it must be with no thought-saving looseness. For, Milton who produced *Paradise Lost* in his old age produced also *Comus* in his twenty-seventh year: the styles of the two are not precisely the same. Indeed *Paradise Lost* is one of the world's greatest poetic achievements, yet *Comus* has a flexibility and a richness that are often missing in the huge high thunders of the epic chant. What, however, Sri Aurobindo wrote at the same age as Milton wrote *Comus*—namely, *Love and Death*, the most finished among his early works in blank verse—holds in its short span of about a thousand lines a snatch of the power and amplitude found in the colossus of Milton's old age and also a delicate plastic splendour reminiscent of *Comus*. The fusion of the early Milton with the late : this may be taken in general to characterise at its best the blank verse of Sri Aurobindo's twenties. But, while some actual influence from

Milton must be admitted, there is seldom a mere repetition of style or structure: what the fusion mainly displays, besides the assured movement of line after moulded line, is just the interweaving of qualities that mostly fall apart in Milton's life. Within the fusion is a diversity of effects that cannot even remotely be always called Miltonic and, whatever the effect, a striking individuality makes itself felt.

Only in one special respect this diversity can be called invariably Miltonic. Milton, more impressively than any other eminent poet, carried the soul of past music mingled with a spirit that makes all things new. In fact, he had the avowed ambition to gather up in his *Paradise Lost* Aeschylus and Sophocles, Virgil, Lucretius and Dante into a mature mastery of style animated by his own genius and character. A consummate scholar in various literatures, deeply saturated with the great traditions of poetry, Sri Aurobindo too exhibits—particularly in the blank verse of *Love and Death*—a phenomenon of many colours from the past, the voice of diverse ages. Yet there is hardly a trace of slavish derivativeness, not a sign of the *pastiche*: only a versatile mode of expression is the outcome. Originality is almost rampant and with a technique to match of skilful sound-accord and metrical modulation and change of pace. Two passages may be picked out nearly at random to illustrate the individual organic nature of the poetry. One is psychologically imaginative:

...He heard

Through the great silence that was now his soul,
The forest sounds, a squirrel's leap through leaves,
The cheeping of a bird just overhead,
A peacock with his melancholy cry
Complaining far away, and tossings dim
And slight unnoticeable stir of trees.

But all these were to him like distant things
And he alone in his heart's void. And yet
No thought he had of her so lately lost.
Rather far pictures, trivial incidents
Of that old life before her delicate face
Had lived for him, dumbly distinct like thoughts
Of men that die, kept with long pomps his mind
Excluding the dead girl. So still he was,
The birds flashed by him with their swift small wings,
Fanning him. Then he moved, then rigorous
Memory through all his body shuddering
Awoke, and he looked up and knew the place,
And recognised greenness immutable,
And saw old trees and the same flowers still bloom.
He felt the bright indifference of earth
And all the lonely uselessness of pain.

The other passage is imaginative with a weird phantasmal motif:

Hopeless Patala, the immutable
Country, where neither sun nor rain arrives,
Nor happy labour of the human plough
Fruitfully turns the soil, but in vague sands
And indeterminable strange rocks and caverns
That into silent blackness huge recede,
Dwell the great serpent and his hosts, writhed forms,
Sinuous, abhorred, through many horrible leagues
Coiling in a half darkness.

This style which is simultaneously linked with the past and inseparable from the personality of the poet is already a vital factor in the narrative of nearly a thousand and five hundred

lines which Sri Aurobindo wrote some years earlier than *Love and Death* and which, in view of its teeming excellences and the poet's young age (barely twenty-three), may be considered with Keats's *Hyperion* the most remarkable production in blank verse in the English tongue. *Urvasie*—the story of King Pururavus, a mortal hero, who took a nymph of heaven, an Apsara, for bride—is shot with an impetuous beauty and steeped in love's countless moods. A passage, capturing various phases of the tumult of desire with an alert kaleidoscopic art which casts back to the sensuous mobility of the Elizabethans and strains forward to the nervous subtlety of the moderns, may be instanced:

He moved, he came towards her. She, a leaf
Before a gust among the nearing trees,
Cowered. But, all a sea of mighty joy
Rushing and swallowing up the golden sand,
With a great cry and glad Pururavus
Seized her and caught her to his bosom thrilled,
Clinging and shuddering. All her wonderful hair
Loosened and the wind seized and bore it streaming
Over the shoulder of Pururavus
And on his cheek a softness. She o'erborne,
Panting, with inarticulate murmers lay,
Like a slim tree half seen through driving hail,
Her naked arms clasping his neck, her cheek
And golden throat averted, and wide trouble
In her large eyes bewildered with their bliss.
Amid her wind-blown hair their faces met.
With her sweet limbs all his, feeling her breasts
Tumultuous up against his beating heart,
He kissed the glorious mouth of heaven's desire.
So clung they as two shipwrecked in a surge.

Then strong Pururavus, with godlike eyes
 Mastering hers, cried tremulous: "O beloved,
 O miser of thy rich and happy voice,
 One word, one word to tell me that thou lovest."
 And Urvasie, all broken on his bosom,
 Her godhead in his passion lost, moaned out
 From her imprisoned breasts, "My lord, my love!"

Nor is Sri Aurobindo in his early twenties an expert only at giving us love's leaping and engulfing joy: he has an equally skilful hand in depicting love's large desolation. When Pururavus lost Urvasie he went searching for her across woods and streams to the mountains that had framed their first meeting. He did not linger on the inferior heights,

But plunged o'er difficult gorge and prone ravine
 And rivers thundering between dim walls,
 Driven by immense desire, until he came
 To dreadful silence of the peaks and trod
 Regions as vast and lonely as his love.

The second and fifth verses here are rare triumphs of inward and outward grandeur. Those mysterious rivers that are like Pururavus's heart and those regions of silent snow that are like his mind are imaginative figurations worded and rhythmed with a strange spiritual and scriptural power that is a presage of Sri Aurobindo's later performance as a poet of Yoga. The presage is, of course, indirect since the inspiring motive is a hunger of a secular kind, high-toned though this hunger is and clear of the crude and the cramped which ordinarily go with secular impulses. But something in the visionary suggestion and in the large deep-thrilling vibrancy throws on that hunger the aspect of a veiled quest of the Infinite.¹

¹ The passage from which these 5 lines have been culled, as well as the

In a less veiled manner *Urvasie* creates an impression of occult realities or entities. There is not yet the Yogi's eye at work, embodying with intimate awareness the forces and beings behind the earth's complex search and march. But with a kindled imagination Sri Aurobindo gives us a glimpse of unearthly strangenesses. Towards the end of the poem there is a long passage attempting what may be called a sustained glimpse. Pururavus is pictured as ascending from earth to meet the lost *Urvasie*. In India the perfect other-worlds have been set by tradition in a mystic north, with their entrance the country of the Uttara-kurus:

a voice at last

Moved from far heavens, other than our sky.
 And he arose as one impelled and came
 Past the supreme great ridges northward, came
 Into the wonderful land far up the world
 Dim-looming, where the Northern Kurus dwell,
 The ancients of the world, invisible,
 Among forgotten mists. Through mists he moved
 Feeling a sense of unseen cities, hearing
 No sound, nor seeing face, but conscious ever
 Of an immense traditionary life
 Throbbing round him and dreams historical...

In the middle part of the poem there is a brief suggestion of the heaven from which *Urvasie* descends to cohabit with the human Pururavus rather than with the Gods. Through the waters of the Ganges' divine source she passes on to the portals of Paradise (Swarga) and along the slope leading towards the world:

preceding long passage quoted, has been dealt with in some detail in *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 18-20, 22-25.

There she looked down
 With yearning eyes far into endless space.
 Behind her stood the green felicitous peaks
 And trembling tops of woods and pulse of blue
 With those calm cloudless summits quivering.
 All heaven was behind her, but she sent
 No look to those eternal seats of joy...

What is memorable here is the communication of the magical livingness of paradisal scenery through words like “trembling”, “pulse”, “quivering”, as if some vast conscious being were grown wood and sky and mountain and as if its eternal bliss were all the time astir in them.

But in *Urvasie* Sri Aurobindo is not merely suggestive of the supra-terrestrial through description. In one passage he brings out in imaginative exposition the heart of the romantic mysticism that has conceived the Apsaras, of whom Pururavus's beloved is the most perfect representative. The Apsaras of Indian mythology, said to have been churned out of the Ocean of Existence, are the occult personalised agencies through which Divine Beauty is at universal play in the phenomena of sense-experience, in the aspirations of the sensuous mind. The passage where Sri Aurobindo is absolutely explicit about the Goddess-function of his heroine is a speech put into the mouth of Tilottama, a sister-nymph, as she brings *Urvasie* to Pururavus from Swarga:

“Yet, son of Ila, one is man and other
 The Apsaras of heaven, daughters of the sea,
 Unlimited in being, Ocean-like.
 They not to one lord yield nor in one face
 Limit the universe, but like sweet air,
 Water unowned and beautiful common light

In unrestrained surrender remain pure.
 In patient paths of Nature upon earth
 And over all the toiling stars we fill
 With sacred passion large high-venturing spirits
 And visit them with bliss; so are they moved
 To immense creative anguish, glad if through
 Heart-breaking toil once in bare seasons dawn
 Our golden breasts between their hands or rush
 Our passionate presence on them like a wave.
 In heaven bright-limbed with bodily embrace
 We clasp the Gods, and clasp the souls of men,
 And know with winds and flowers liberty.
 But what hast thou with us or winds or flowers?"

Some of Sri Aurobindo's subtlest and most felicitous poetry is here. An echo or rather counterpart of phrases like:

glad if through
 Heart-breaking toil once in bare seasons dawn
 Our golden breasts between their hands or rush
 Our passionate presence on them like a wave—

meets us in the long account—too long to be quoted at this point in full¹—of Ruru's descent into the Underworld in search of the prematurely dead Priyumvada. This account may well be adjudged a *ne plus ultra* in the *genre* which we may call mythic rather than mystic but which in Sri Aurobindo's hands is still typically Indian in that the unearthly is as if felt and seen and not just conceived vividly by the curious thought. After sailing along the Ganges in a dim evening, Ruru launches on the ocean. There, with a whirling of the horizons, he is drawn in by the profundities:

¹ All of it is given on pp. 17-19.

He down the gulf where the loud waves collapsed
 Descending, saw with floating hair arise
 The daughters of the sea in pale green light,
 A million mystic breasts suddenly bare...

Love and Death contains also what we have termed an indirect presage of Sri Aurobindo's later spiritual and scriptural power of expression. There are those lines of majestic pathos:

Long months he travelled between grief and grief,
 Reliving thoughts of her with every pace,
 Measuring vast pain in his immortal mind.

We are reminded of that high-water mark of the Miltonic "grand style severe":

Who would lose,
 Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
 Those thoughts that wander through Eternity?

Something of the same accent, though at a more reflective than visionary pitch, breathes in Sri Aurobindo's line:

Through the great silence that was now his soul...

But *Love and Death*, as its very name implies, is a testament of the passionate heart and, just as the descent into the Underworld is a masterpiece in its own kind, the speech of Madan, the Indian Eros, attains a supreme level with its psychological penetrativeness. We may glance at a few of the arresting phrases in this 41-line-long "manifesto". "I," says the Love-God,

"knit life to life
 With interfusions of opposing souls

And sudden meetings and slow sorceries . . .”

“I,” he continues, “teach filial heart-beats”

“the young mother’s passionate deep look,
Earth’s high similitude of One not earth.”

These are among the gifts for which he is praised. He ends by adding:

“But fiercer shafts I can, wild storms blown down
Shaking fixed minds and melting marble natures,
Racked thirsting jealousy and kind hearts made stone: . .
Cold lusts that linger and fierce fickleness...”

In another place, after being told of Ruru’s daily happiness with his young bride, we read:

But Love has joys for spirits born divine
More bleeding-lovely than his thornless rose.

Working out this truth, *Love and Death* communicates to us its sense of the tears of things and, at the same time, the indomitable smile within man’s soul which wrestles with fate and triumphs over mortality.

The blank verse of both *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* is surprisingly supple for the late Victorian era when liberties were not very usual. We may glance at a few of these early manifestations of Sri Aurobindo’s sensitive technique. The dangerous second foot is inverted in

The birds flashed by him with their swift small wings

and followed by what is nearly a trochee, a light one which at the same time seems to keep up the suddenness suggested by the preceding foot and join up with the run of slack syllables between “flashed” and the three stressed ones at the end. This run suggests the brevity of the flashing and, we may add, the concluding trio of stresses in which only one stress falls on an intrinsically long vowel conveys too the quick though unmistakable passage and the diminutive though definite disturbance. In

Giant precipices black-hewn and bold

there is a strong double trochee at the start making a clear counterpoint to the iambic beat, a counterpoint which resolves into regularity only at the close after passing through a pair of peculiar knots of the two movements: a doubly slack third foot and a doubly accented fourth. A very effective combination of unexpected feet, commencing with a dactyl, is:

Lingering, while the wind smote him with her hair.

But perhaps the most memorable is:

Mad the boy thrilled upwards, then spent ebbed back.

The rhythm starting with a trochee, followed by a spondee, again a trochee, a semi-spondee and a full spondaic foot, renders the technique keenly expressive of the sudden access of emotion becoming strong and sustained enough to create a break in the normal movement of life and cause a vertical leap, as it were, and, by that extraordinary effort, exhausting itself and making the leaper drop into the old posture, with a slow weight at first and afterwards heavily all a heap.

Some instances of originality in the word-technique of these early narratives may also be marked. In the lines from *Urvasie*,

Suddenly

From motionless battalions as outride
A speed disperse of horsemen,

there is not only a Miltonic syntax : there is also the word "disperse", a Latinised verbal adjective making a new Miltonism. One may doubt whether this is wholly a success. But surely a creative touch of the Latin scholar in Sri Aurobindo is present in the phrase from *Love and Death* :

But if with price, ah God! what easier! Tears
Dreadful, innumerable I will absolve
Or pay with anguish through the centuries.

The word "absolve" is used not in its English sense of releasing from sins or from debts, but in its Latin connotation of paying off a debt and then too with a stretched sense, for instead of saying "I will pay off with tears" Ruru says, "I will pay off tears" as the price of the absolution—a deliberate incorrectness, a purposive violence to the language for the sake of poetic tension. Apropos of Latinisation, a piquantly imaginative term may be pointed out in

As a bright bird comes flying
From airy extravagance to his own home,

where "extravagance" is employed with its Latin connotation of "wandering outside" striking through the English sense of excess or immoderation. A word-originality achieved by a small stroke of colloquial, in preference to academic, grammar is in Madan's allusion to the Death-god :

...but behind me, older than me,
He comes with night and cold tremendous shade.

We have in the second “me” with its cumulative power, an example where to be ungrammatical is better than being ineffective in sense or intolerable in rhythm with the more correct and literary “I”. Shelley too knew this when in his *Ode to the West Wind* he said : “Be thou me....” Finally, we may cite as word-originality of another type the suggestive effect of consonantal sounds in the line mentioning one of the Snake-lords of the Underworld—

Magic Carcotaka all flecked with fire—

a line of splendid art in both visual and rhythmical impact from that mythic imagination which is among the most noteworthy features of *Love and Death*.

3

THE DRAMAS OF LIFE-VISION, THE PATRIOTIC INSPIRATION, THE PHILOSOPHICAL POETRY

The mythic imagination passes more and more into the mystic as Sri Aurobindo penetrates to the very centre of the Indian consciousness and begins to practise Yoga. But this mysticism is not only free from a mere cloudy hugeness: it is also not restricted to a fiery teeming with ethereal populations: the earthly and the human are mostly filled out by it to a divinity of their own in a vibrant continuity with the supra-terrestrial, the ultra-human. And this bent towards synthesis but transposes to a new plane what was already an effective element in his Romanticist work. For, that work, as we have remarked, combines something Elizabethan and something modern with the nineteenth-century Romanticism. The com-

bination is chiefly perceptible in a voluptuous directness—nothing vulgar or lascivious yet a sharp frank awareness of the impassioned body and its enamoured rhythms. This combination affines *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* to the poetry of Kalidasa, as perhaps might be guessed from the fact that the former treats in essence the same theme as a play of Kalidasa's which Sri Aurobindo translated soon after. Out of many possible instances we may pick out just one in passing. In *Love and Death*, Ruru remembers all the enchanting ways in which he has called Priyumvada by "her liquid name". Among these ways there is at one extreme his murmuring in deep quiet moments

That name like a religion in her ear

and at the other, in sweet secrecy again,

Bridal outpourings of her broken name.

Who save Kalidasa could match the happy audacity of this compact phrase about the name being uttered brokenly because of the quivering gasps of excited delight during the act of union?

The fine this-worldly energy shown thus here and variously elsewhere under the Romanticist aspect persists in many forms, with a bright eye on the immediately tangible, in all of Sri Aurobindo's subsequent creation.

It is inevitably evident in the dramatic pieces he began composing. They take up some psychological movement, either a general phase of the development of man's mind or the persistent trait of a nation and personalise it in a well-knit scheme of vividly interplaying characters. Among these dramatic pieces—mostly in the Romanticist tradition though without the crude piling on of externally daubed effects or the tearing of the

passion into garish tatters, that often disfigures this tradition—the first to be published and presumably the earliest to be written was *Perseus the Deliverer*.¹ This play is on the Elizabethan model and is Elizabethan too in its blank verse, but at places the semi-mythic semi-mystic manner comes in or else a barer more intellectualised style. Of the vehement vein a sample is the piquant simile about a shipwreck—

From all sides
The men are shaken out, as rattling peas
Leap from a long and bursting sheath,

or that sadistic phrase about wrenching and distorting the body

till each inch of flesh
Gives out its separate shriek,

or the exaggeration—

The sea
Is tossed upon itself and its huge bottoms
Catch chinks of unaccustomed day.

The semi-mythic semi-mystic manner vibrates in lines like

If thou hadst lived as I,
Daily devoted to the temple dimness,
And seen the awful shapes that live in night,
And heard the awful sounds that move at will
When Ocean with the midnight is alone,
Thou wouldst not doubt.

¹ The other works, in rough chronological order, are: *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Rodogune*, *Vasavadutta*, *Eric* as complete works and a few in fragmentary form.

The quieter and more idea-limpid style meets us in

The people's love
Is a glimmer on quicksands in a gliding sea:
Today they are with thee, tomorrow turn elsewhere.
Wisdom, strength, policy alone are sure,

or in

Then let the shrine
That looked out from earth's breast into the sunlight,
Be cleansed of its red memory of blood,
And the dread Form that lived within its precincts
Transfigure into a bright compassionate God.

But the more typical mode of expression has the Elizabethan colour. Elizabethan to the marrow are also the prose passages in the play, racy and even verging wittily on the improper—passages that seem not really intrusions from another medium but integrally woven into the play as well as into the verse-portions in their respective scenes. And both the poetry and the prose, however Romanticist in texture, are orientated towards flesh-and-blood actualities and, in some shape or other, the sense of the tangible runs almost everywhere.

But everywhere too is the thrill of the ideal. In each play some theme of aspiration is set moving within the scheme of things and, while the human cross-currents of personality and passion are depicted with gusto, the drama of evolutionary nature is movingly worked out through it with either delicacy or power or, most often, with a subtle mixture of both. Just one illustration may suffice—part of a scene from *Perseus*. Andromeda, who towards the close of the play is chained to a rock to be devoured by a sea-monster but is rescued by Perseus, is here longing to save shipwrecked foreigners condemned to be

sacrificed to the sea-god Poseidon. The goddess Athene comes as her helper.

ANDROMEDA

O you poor shuddering men, my human fellows,
Horribly bound beneath the grisly knife
You feel already groping for your hearts,
Pardon me each long moment that you wrestle
With grim anticipation. O, and you,
If there is any god in the deaf skies
That pities men or helps them, O protect me!
But if you are inexorably unmoved
And punish pity, I, Andromeda,
Who am a woman on this earth, will help
My brothers. Then, if you must punish me,
Strike home. You should have given me no heart;
It is too late now to forbid it feeling.

She is going out. Athene appears.

What is this light, this glory? who art thou,
O beautiful marble face amid the lightnings?
My heart faints with delight, my body trembles,
Intolerable ecstasy beats in my veins;
I am oppressed and tortured with thy beauty.

ATHENE

I am Athene.

ANDROMEDA

Art thou a goddess? Thy name
We hear far off in Syria.

ATHENE

I am she
Who helps and has compassion on struggling mortals.

ANDROMEDA
(*falling prostrate*)

Do not deceive me! I will kiss thy feet.
O joy! thou art! thou art!

ATHENE

Lift up thy head,
My servant.

ANDROMEDA

Thou art! there are not only void
Azure and cold inexorable laws.

ATHENE

Stand up, O daughter of Cassiope,
Wilt thou then help these men of Babylonia,
My mortals whom I love?

ANDROMEDA

I help myself,
When I help these.

ATHENE

To thee alone I gave
This knowledge. O virgin, O Andromeda,

It reached thee through that large and noble heart
Of woman beating in a little child.
But dost thou know that thy reward shall be
Betrayal and fierce hatred? God and man
Shall league in wrath to kill and torture thee
Mid dire revilings.

ANDROMEDA

My reward shall be
To cool this anguish of pity in my heart
And be at peace: if dead, O still at peace!

The role of Sri Aurobindo the dramatic poet is worth bearing in mind when, face to face with his later poetic work, one is inclined to believe that he looks too much beyond human nature. Of course, even his philosophical and spiritual inspiration would be misjudged by such a belief; for he always returns upon the world of clay and flux and common breath after his conquest of fire and ether. But in his dramas that world itself is the immediate subject. Sri Aurobindo shows by the labour he has spent on personalities and situations set in a variety of climes and ages that he never shies away from the touch or the clutch of man as he is. He lends himself to man at every stage of his development. The young adventurer, the longing lover, the ardent soldier, the powerful leader, the calm counsellor, the *bon viveur*, the dreamy girl-soul, the mind of mature womanhood—all these can find response in Sri Aurobindo and are called towards him by the wide range of his dramatic self-expression. He refuses nothing, he takes every chance to seize on multi-coloured life and, within matters mundane and along roads of day-to-day history, he renders visible the ideal, the highest motive possible to whatever may be the complex of circum-

stances, the maze of desire and ambition and vocation. No direct preaching is here, but an organic potentiality laid bare in the distance by means of the picture of a heart feeling its way beyond itself. It is as if Sri Aurobindo grew into a spiritual philosopher and a mystic Yogi in such a natural manner that, looking back upon the manifold path of creative imagination trod by him, he could say at the close of his career: "I am not summoning everyone to be a spiritual philosopher or a mystic Yogi. Come to me with all your striving, hungering, ordinary humanity and you will receive my guidance. I will accept your limitations and lead you through them. Nothing human is alien to me and nothing Aurobindonian should be alien to you. There is always a mode of being human, which can prepare for the divine without ceasing to be itself. My demands are never fanatic. To those who are ready to plunge into spirituality, I disclose the wonderful short cut. To those who still hope and fear and love and travail in the normal formula, I point the long way which also is wonderful, but with a slow surprise of psychological progression leading them forward instead of letting them go round and round as they usually do."

Nor is it only in the drama—whether shot with ancient mythology or criss-crossed with quasi-historical vicissitudes—that Sri Aurobindo comes down to common earth with an uplifting hold upon it. The sense of the tangible and the orientation towards flesh-and-blood actualities, along with the thrill of the ideal, run also through the narrative, *Baji Prabhou*, which he wrote soon after the time of most of the plays: that is, during the dawn of the mystic in him. But they take an extreme and martial shape now. For, at first the mysticism is part of a movement towards a novel nationalist resurgence against foreign rule, in which the country of birth is viewed and worshipped as a mighty Mother Spirit that is a face and

front of the Supreme Power creative of the universe. A virile offspring of this political mysticism is *Baji Prabhou*, based on the actual episode of the self-sacrifice which Baji Prabhou, a lieutenant of Shivaji, made in order to cover his master's retreat. Here is a blank verse no longer packed with colour and sorcery, passion and fantasy, yet betraying no dearth of expressive intensity. It is Sri Aurobindo's greatest contribution to patriotic literature, but it is more than patriotism, for its chief merit is the convincing way in which is disclosed the religious core of the Mahratta uprising under Shivaji's leadership. The key-passage, therefore, is the one that begins:

not in this living net
Of flesh and nerve, nor in the flickering mind
Is a man's manhood seated. God within
Rules us, who in the Brahmin and the dog
Can, if He will, show equal godhead...

In the same period and charged with the same extraordinary patriotism is another work of Sri Aurobindo's—now not one on an extensive scale or an altogether original contribution but a memorable translation which in its brevity packs an intensity capable of rousing millions. Indeed in the Sanskrit version, interspersed with a few Bengali words, from which he has done his English rendering, the poem was the master-word of Indian Nationalism—the rebuilder of a fallen people, the revealer of their inmost truth, the song which made heroes out of mud and whose bespelling profundity gave the very act of death the sense of a supreme ecstasy. The unique union of sweetness, simple directness and high poetic force in Bankim Chandra Chatterji's *Bande Mataram* is difficult to reproduce with absolute accuracy in English verse. But the inspired drive of it is admirably caught in general by Sri Aurobindo:

Mother, I bow to thee!
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
Cool with thy winds of delight,
Dark fields waving, Mother of might,
Mother free.

Glory of moonlight dreams,
Over thy branches and lordly streams,—
Clad in thy blossoming trees,
Mother, giver of ease,
Laughing low and sweet!
Mother, I kiss thy feet,
Speaker, sweet and low!
Mother, to thee I bow.

Who hath said thou art weak in thy lands,
When the swords flash out in twice seventy million hands
And seventy million voices roar
Thy dreadful name from shore to shore?
With many strengths who art mighty and stored,
To thee I call, Mother and Lord!
Thou who savest, arise and save!
To her I cry who ever her foemen drave
Back from plain and sea
And shook herself free.

Thou art wisdom, thou art law,
Thou our heart, our soul, our breath,
Thou the love divine, the awe
In our hearts that conquers death.
Thine the strength that nerves the arm,
Thine the beauty, thine the charm,
Every image made divine
In our temples is but thine.

Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,
With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen,
Thou art Lakshmi lotus-throned,
And the Muse a hundred-toned.
Pure and perfect without peer,
Mother, lend thine ear.
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
Dark of hue, candid-fair
In thy soul, with jewelled hair
And the glorious smile divine,
Loveliest of all earthly lands,
Showering wealth from well-stored hands!
Mother, mother mine!
Mother sweet, I bow to thee,
Mother great and free!

Although a translation, the poem comes as something essentially Aurobindonian, born as it was of the translator's having felt the original in his very blood-stream during the days when he led the revolt of Bengal ("Seventy million voices") against British rule. And it has a depth of spiritual suggestion which the exegesis he is reported to have offered in a speech delivered in 1908 in the grand square of the National School of Amraoti lays bare excellently. In the light of that explanation it stands out also as essentially Aurobindonian, representative of the philosophic and mystic vision growing in him at the time. Not only is each phrase replete with precise and necessary significance, but the various phrases form an unfolding scheme both artistically and metaphysically satisfying. There is a three-stepped progression. As with the individual, so with the nation, there are three sheaths or bodies—the gross or outer, the subtle or inner, the causal or higher. The first consists of the physical

elements, the shapes, the visible organic functioning. Here it is the rapid rivers and the glimmering orchards, the winds and the harvests waving, the moon-magical nights in forest and on river-side. A transition from the outer body of the Nation-Mother to the inner is through the human populations, the warrior men who are the physical instruments of the fine frenzy of freedom that is hers. Their teeming vitality is the cry of independence she sends forth from the inner to the outer—the inner that is a formation of beautiful disciplined powers, an inspired energy, a pure passion, an illumined thought, a righteous will, an aethesis enchanting and refining. This subtle sheath of her being bears hints of a still greater mode of her existence and by those hints the supra-individual and national self of her mingles, in our enthusiasms as well as in our meditations, with all the symbols of the Infinite and the Eternal our religious nature installs everywhere in our land. That still greater mode is the prime creative archimage, at once single and many-aspected, whose evolving expression is the vast world with its nations and peoples. Cause and controller from its transcendental status, it is the Divine Truth of all formulated being, the ever-living supreme Personality whose power and bliss and knowledge are the perfection towards which we aspire in this country of ours when we love so vehemently the soil sanctified by hero and saint and seer and when we fling ourselves so happily into the service of the majestic and maternal Presence that we feel to be the indivisible India stretched in a myriad harmonious moods across space and time.

Round about the period of this insight into what may be designated the real National Anthem of India Sri Aurobindo produced many other pieces and we note not only the heroic fusing with the mystic but also the philosopher manifesting in the Yogi. Most of his philosophical poetry is precise without either abstractness on the one hand or on the other a too-

superficial clarity. Here and there a dry touch, a pursuit of the idea rather than the metaphysical reality behind it are perceptible, but, by and large, the philosopher and the poet suffer no divorce—and, when the full Yogi suffuses and absorbs both the poet and the philosopher, beauty and truth become identical and grow one body of something deeper: sheer spiritual Light. But before this transformation occurs we have a large utterance of the animated intellect in diverse modes. It blends the simple with the subtle as in *God*,¹ where we can mark even the argumentative turn—"Therefore we know..."—and yet the speech has a living suggestion of the Transcendent who is also the Cosmic and the Immanent: the brief crystallised expression strikes home with a concrete perspicuity some of the antinomies of the Divine Presence in relation to the created world. The intellect is at times energetically pointed and deliberate as in *A Vision of Science*:

... And Science confidently, "Nothing am I but earth,
Tissue and nerve and from the seed a birth,
A mould, a plasm, a gas, a little that is much.
In these grey cells that quiver to each touch
The secret lies of man; they are the thing called I.
Matter insists and matter makes reply.
Shakespeare was this; this force in Jesus yearned
And conquered by the cross; this only learned
The secret of the suns that blaze afar;
This was Napoleon's giant mind of war."
I heard and marvelled in myself to see
The infinite deny infinity.
Yet the weird paradox seemed justified;
Even mysticism shrank out-mystified.

¹ Quoted on p. 30.

Then we have the thinking mind swiftly and sweepingly powerful as in *To the Sea*,¹ with its challenge to circumstance from a depth of immense self-awareness—outer infinity defied by the inner infinite. Life's debate with the ultimate mystery becomes massive and majestic in that colloquy, *The Rishi*:

...Rishi, thy thoughts are like the blazing sun
 Eye cannot face.
How shall our souls on that bright awful One
 Hope ever to gaze
Who lights the world from His eternity
 With a few rays?

Among Sri Aurobindo's compositions of this period *The Rishi* is especially notable for the original form it achieves by its pairs of rhymed pentameters interwoven with a *terza rima* of two-foot lines and for the poetry it sustains at considerable length with a weighty and at the same time a flexible thought-content. Although essentially no less dynamic than *To the Sea*, it has a more contained note which lets the ideative element stand forth in subtler colours:

O King, sight is not vain, nor any sound.
 Weeds that float
Upon a puddle and the majestic round
 Of the suns
Are thoughts eternal,—what man loves to laud
 And what he shuns;
Through glorious things and base the wheel of God
 For ever runs.

¹ Quoted on pp. 32-33.

O King, no thought is vain; our very dreams
 Substantial are;
 The light we see in fancy, yonder gleams
 In the star.

At the other pole to this manner in the same universe of discourse is the accent of *Invitation*, composed while Sri Aurobindo was in Alipur Jail on a political charge and while he was turning the enforced solitude into an opportunity of mystic self-exploration. We may say that *To the Sea* mediates between the two styles, vehemently working out its thought to a greater explicitness than does *Invitation*. The last-named makes us best realise one of the reasons for the easy success of the intellect in Sri Aurobindo's verse. The intellect succeeds so well not only because its perceptions and discriminations are Spirit-touched but also because the poet puts behind them a vigorous "vital" being, carried over from his youth when it had its royal self-deployment in the impassioned narratives. *Invitation* brings this *élan vital* very effectively forward, even swamping the play of ideas yet channelling a wide intellectual sight of the Yogi Soul mounting Godward and throwing at the world its arduous call:

With wind and the weather beating round me
 Up to the hill and the moorland I go.
 Who will come with me? Who will climb with me?
 Wade through the brook and tramp through the snow?

Not in the petty circles of cities
 Cramped by your doors and your walls I dwell;
 Over me God is blue in the welkin,
 Against me the wind and the storm rebel.

I sport with solitude here in my regions,
Of misadventure have made me a friend.
Who would live largely? Who would live freely?
Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend.

I am the lord of tempest and mountain,
I am the Spirit of freedom and pride.
Stark must he be and a kinsman to danger
Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.

Of course, the lordly loneliness of the dangerous and unfrequented heights is not the end of the spiritual story for Sri Aurobindo. *The Rishi* makes this abundantly evident. For all its initial stress on the search for a remote and absolute One, it grows in its polyphonous progression and final resolution a forerunner of the comprehensive message of the Aurobindonian Yoga as elaborated in the Pondicherry-epoch. This Yoga does not seek to be lost in a far-off Immutable to the entire forgetfulness of earth-existence: it sees the fundamental unity as the possessor of an innumerable potentiality and as a Creative Being who actualises that potentiality in some perfect plane of divine archetypes and towards whom our souls must rise and through whom we must strive for an evolutionary expression of those archetypes in our entire nature and for a harmony of the One and the Many in a new collective life.

Sri Aurobindo's feeling of divine concreteness behind the philosophical intellect's graspings of significance on high significance within the passing pageant of time-born figures

Like transient shapes that sweep with half-guessed truth
A luminous wall,

we may conjecture from the poetic bursts of pure vision that during this period interspersed now and then the rhythmic

unrolling of lofty and difficult conceptions. In the course of one such unrolling in *The Rishi* we are told of our life's long soul-history:

...we rise from pyre,
 We rise from grave,
 We mould our future by our past desire,
 We break, we save,
 We find the music that we could not find,
 The thought think out
 We could not then perfect, and from the mind
 That brilliant rout
 Of wonders marshal into living forms...

In the short lyric, *Revelation*¹, a magical outrush by the "wonders" themselves is given us in a gemlike flash. We actually feel that

Someone of the heavenly rout
 From behind the veil ran out.

The seer in Sri Aurobindo was keeping pace, though not always openly, with the sage in him in the march towards what we have termed "sheer spiritual Light".

4

GRADES OF POETIC QUALITY: SOME CRITICAL DISTINCTIONS

Before we look at the maturest and final phase of the Aurobindonian world of poetry, we may cast—as a phrase in *Revelation* has it—"a hurried glance behind" to make, apropos of Sri Aurobindo's work so far, some clear distinctions between

¹ Quoted on pp. 31-32.

fair levels on the one side and fine uplands on the other and then between the latter's laudable success and a sheer excellence of peaks beyond praise.

Our task is hardly unpleasant since it is not one of demarcating non-poetry from poetry: thanks to the nature of our material, it merely involves recording lower and higher degrees of enjoyment. Sri Aurobindo himself never disclaimed inequalities at places in his work. Nor did he discourage honest criticism—that is, criticism made with awareness of the poet's aim, understanding of the *genre* in which he has couched his creation, response to his individual personality, sensitiveness to the peculiar movement of his style. Such criticism even of a great poet can only help his greatness to become more defined and nullify with the justice of its appreciation, scrupulously “this side idolatry”, the literary bungling and botching which he is bound to provoke from prejudiced cleverness or ambitious incompetence.

The task we have assumed demands an examination of those poems or passages where we can easily distinguish in a compact mass the diverse grades. Necessarily, such poems or passages are not Sri Aurobindo at his sustained best. Our selection of them, therefore, must be understood in its limited bearing: we must be careful to avoid the inference that all of him is thus variable in short spans.

We may begin by taking up the picturesque *genre* and picking out there the genuinely revealing as against the ornamental and colourful, no matter if charming. Here is a passage from that very early composition, *Songs to Myrtilla*, published in 1894:

Snowdrops are thy feet,
Thy waist a crescent moon,
And like a silver wand
Thy body slight doth stand

Or like a silver beech aspire.
 Thine arms are walls of white caresses,
 Thy lips a tale of crimson kisses,
 Thine eyes two amorous armouries of fire.

A dash and a lilt attract us in all the eight lines, but in the first five do we get beyond fancy brightly disporting itself, a pleasurable flourish of decorativeness? An unusual metaphor like

Thy waist a crescent moon.

tempts us to search for some subtlety but we return without much discovery though still keeping our glimmer of delight at the delicately strange. Its indication of slender silveriness is continued in the succeeding lines. And we may take note of the shade of difference between the slight body standing and the same body aspiring. The image of the silver wand has another vision than the image of the silver beech—the smooth-barked glossy-leaved tree with branches, a vertical whiteness which appears to lift arms upward. This picture links on happily to the next verse where arms are openly spoken of in a new vision of whiteness. Yet, for all their inspiration, the first five lines are lovely surfaces. They are poetry, but we cannot allow ourselves to consider them in general as more than fair levels. A grade above them is the description:

Thy lips a tale of crimson kisses.

We are here on the verge of a real ascension into fine uplands. A *soupçon* of the conventional, however, holds us back despite the push of the word “tale” with its double sense of an absorbing sequence and a thrilling totality. The phrase—

Thine eyes two amorous armouries of fire—

vividly suggests a wealth of beauty going out in a gift of passionate love. Fine poetry is achieved. What it lacks a little is the thrust of an utter newness, such as the "crescent moon" promised at first glimpse. It is only in the line preceding both the above—

Thine arms are walls of white caresses—

that we have the rounded originality we need. This verse conjures up a warm vigour absolute in its shutting away of everything from the beloved except happiness by means of an intense yet tender self-giving which is also a seizing of the beloved. The epithet "white" indicates simultaneously the body-hue of beauty and the soul-tint of idealism. "Walls", on first impression, is rather exaggerative, if not even a trifle incongruous, but its very extremism is its virtue and the boldness of it asserts itself in the end. It is indeed the essential builder of the line's poetic value. And whatever oddness it may carry falls into sympathetic place in the total effect by its alliterative collocation with "white". "White" being at the same time natural and striking where arms' caresses are concerned, "walls" with the same initial consonant and with a possible colour-affinity stands as the inevitable word. Not only has the line true fineness: it has also some gleam of the excellent if it is considered out of its context of rather light-hearted exuberance.

Coming to more reflective poetry we may choose, from a slightly later collection, *The Fear of Death* for our purposes. Evidently an early remnant, it divides, in the matter of quality, more or less neatly into a pair of equal eight-lined parts—one of what we may term a somewhat facile felicity tending to be consciously honey-tongued at several points, and one of moved imagination seeking accurate loveliness of speech everywhere. Both the parts breathe the same romantic tradition, but they belong to different poetic grades.

The word “poetic” is important. We are not trying to assess whether a great truth, a fundamental verity, is disclosed. In Sri Aurobindo’s early and middle periods, several subjects are treated, to which his later work returns on another plane. Indeed, often enough the later work is a further deepening of what is already far below the surface: but on occasion the young Sri Aurobindo sees life in a light peculiar to the time or proper to a certain cultural *milieu* or demanded by some contextual necessity. Or else an aspect of some vision which is comprehensive in a subsequent period is isolated and then explored in its own wholeness as if that wholeness were the entire truth. Surely such a setting-about is not devoid of vital momentousness; yet we should desist from arriving at a final judgment on Sri Aurobindo’s thought or insight on the basis of this or that reflective or even philosophical pronouncement here. With a mind like his in operation at whatever period, significant issues are bound to quicken under his hand: still the reader must be advised not to jump always to ultimate conclusions but view things in their right places within the grand Aurobindonian totality. In any case, we are not conducting a comparative study of truth as such: we are focusing—within a selected field—on the degrees of the poetic uncovering of whatever perception has pressed towards utterance.

In *The Fear of Death*, the opening half goes:

Death wanders through our lives at will, sweet Death
Is busy with each intake of our breath.
Why do you fear her? Lo, her laughing face
All rosy with the light of jocund grace!
A kind and lovely maiden culling flowers
In a sweet garden fresh with vernal showers.
This is the thing you fear, young portress bright
Who opens to our souls the worlds of light.

The craftsmanship is fine enough—the pauses well-varied, the feet judiciously modulated, special effects produced of verbal position like “Death” beginning and ending the first line or of alliterative music like “wanders-will”, “busy-breath”, “fear-face”, “kind-culling”. The technique appears to slip up when “sweet” and “light” are twice used within a brief compass. But there is a point in the repetition. Death the destroyer is sought to be shown as equally desirable with the delightful things destroyed: if the garden is sweet, Death too is such. Again, to prepare for Death’s function as a “portress bright” to “the worlds of light”, her face is said to be lit up with “jocund grace”: she is herself a luminous being. What may be criticised in this poetic procedure is the tendency of the expressive urge to yield too quickly to the pressure of the vision: a patient refusal to be satisfied, until the inner oestrus raises the original, the individual response of eye and ear in the linguistic spirit, is not altogether there. What that refusal might have brought about is illustrated at another moment of the inspiration in the lines. Thus a “maiden culling flowers” has her face very aptly termed “all rosy”: the destructive culling is rendered as much a phenomenon of beauty’s blossoming as are the plucked blooms of springtide. The point is made without any obviousness. It is the lack of sufficient subtlety and the presence of an over-easy spontaneity in certain couplets, that send a waft of fancy into the imagination and make the eight-lined composition as a whole take on the look of a fair level of poetry instead of a fine upland.

The quality is not negligible. To evaluate it we have only to pick up a lyric of Shelley’s, whose starting-point is similar to our poem’s:

Death is here and death is there,
Death is busy everywhere.

But Shelley goes more or less round and round in his four stanzas, ringing small changes on the theme of universal mortality, though not without some exercise of his usual gift of melody in the midst of a jiggling metre at cross-purposes with the ideas and images. Sri Aurobindo has an impetus to development all through and an appropriate metrical medium as well as a deeper element of thought. Perhaps this element too has some link with Shelley—but Shelley of a more mature mood. An obvious clue is Sri Aurobindo's "flowers / In a sweet garden fresh with vernal showers", which seems to hark back to the famous *Skylark's* "Sound of vernal showers" and "Rain-awakened flowers" and "all that ever was / Joyous and clear and fresh..." *The Fear of Death* might be taken in general as an attempt to give body to Shelley's surmise when addressing his bird:

Waking or asleep,
 Thou of death must deem
 Things more true and deep
 Than we mortals dream,

Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

The truer and deeper things that Sri Aurobindo's lines deem of death may be said to represent the after-life destiny of the essential psyche in us, our soul proper hidden within a mental-vital-physical complex and often obscured by its integument. Whatever be the Karmic reward or punishment of the all-too-human personality, the psychic being which is an evolving delegate in us of the Divine would move through the passage of death ultimately to "the worlds of light" from which it came, the Wordsworthian "God who is our home", the star-beaconed "abode where the Eternal are" of Shelley's *Adonais*.

However, while Sri Aurobindo's lines are maturer than the lyric Shelley wrote on ubiquitous Death, they do not rise in their more reflective strain to a full artistic result. Something of the less intense Shelley's romanticism gets here and there into the tone. And this is not unnatural since we are dealing with one of Sri Aurobindo's late juvenilia.

But with the second half of the poem we have a clean breakthrough into a higher utterance. It seeks to solve the puzzle of the first half's question about Death, "Why do you fear her?"

Is it because the twisted stem must feel
Pain when the tenderest hands its glory steal?
Is it because the flowerless stalk droops dull
And ghastly now that was so beautiful?
Or is it the opening portal's horrid jar
That shakes you, feeble souls of courage bare?
Death is but changing of our robes to wait
In wedding garments at the Eternal's gate.

Although the very ultimate alchemy of the poetic mood cannot be read in the lines, a precision of sight and a penetrativeness of feeling are perceptible from the start: they create the correct dispositions and combinations and oppositions of words and rhythms. A spark is at once struck in our imagination by the tenderest hands being shown as unavoidably causing pain. A happy paradox arises, giving us an unexpected in-look through the appearances of earth-life: revealing poetry faces us. And notice how an inspired skill has put the significant word "Pain" at the very beginning of the second line after a flow-over from the preceding one—we pass through a suspense and then encounter what is due to be there with a poised flash, so to speak. The manner in which "Pain" commences line 2 suggests also, by the falling movement of the trochaic foot, the state of

the twisted stem—and the suggestion is confirmed by the next line which brings in “droops”. “Droops” itself confronts us in the midst of words which, like it, are strongly stressed so that the expression “stalk droops dull” makes with its metrical dead-weight, as it were, the thing spoken of enact itself rhythmically no less than verbally. The effect is all the more enforced by the alliterative trend of the poem coming to a head with the two *d*’s occurring close together in consecutive monosyllables.

The next revealing moment centres in “the opening portal’s horrid jar”. Again a meaningful paradox: what frees us, from imprisonment, into “the worlds of light” is a soul-shaking experience. The image of door-unclosing in the poem’s first half was a little bland and pretty: now it is quite vivid and powerful, the tension of the significance driving home pointedly with the internal rhyme of the initial syllables in “portal” and “horrid”. As if to prepare this concord between the sounds with which the two words open, we have the adjective “opening” just before them, having in its own first syllable too the *o*-sound though with a different inflexion. The artistry is everywhere admirable, creative from within outwards. A mind-kindling vision is rendered in its own life-throb: no conventional poeticism is fitted with a “new look” in order to throw up some bright-looking picture. And the true stir of the imagination runs on into the final couplet where something of a slightly superficial romanticism reappears with the sentimental metaphor of the “wedding garments”. But the inner poetic connection with what has gone before infuses a subtle breath of high seriousness: the portal-image returns in “gate”, while the changing of “our robes” into “wedding garments” elaborates the hint of the apostrophe “feeble souls of courage bare”, which figures what is bare of courage and, by implication, what is clad in feebleness, thus leading us later to equate the robes with

feebleness and the garments with courage and thereby to understand that death removes the vesture of weakness which is our body and constitutes by that removal a new clothing of strength. This clothing makes us ready for the ecstatic companionship with the Eternal who expects us in His house of light beyond a gate which offers with a terrifying sound an entry into bliss. A revealing eye carries with the aid of an inspired technique a truth of inner feeling into the apparent materials of a colourful decorativeness which might easily ring a trifle hollow.

The terminal couplet shows what the first half of *The Fear of Death* could uniformly have become with a keener afflatus. A like promise holds for the fair level in a different style practised by the Muse of Sri Aurobindo's middle years. In the same group as *The Fear of Death* we have *Life and Death* treating an analogous theme:

Life, death,—death, life; the words have led for ages
 Our thought and consciousness and firmly seemed
 Two opposites; but now long-hidden pages
 Are opened, liberating truths undreamed.
 Life only is, or death is life disguised,—
 Life a short death until by life we are surprised.

The vein now is philosophical and not merely reflective, the language borrowed from the discursive plane, with neither fancy nor imagination overtly at work. The "long-hidden pages" are the sole explicit touch of sight. But "led" is a concrete term and so too is "opened" in relation to the pages. The four-syllabled "liberating" is another animated turn: we feel not only a large activity as of unlocking huge prison-gates but also an efflux of weighty and far-reaching secrets into the light of day. All these locutions, plus the skilful metrical rhythm and a faint breath of emotion accompanying the intellectual accent,

save the first four lines from aridity. In spirit no less than in technique the lines stand as poetry. Yet they cannot be rated as much more than fair. It is only with the final couplet that we have notable articulation.

This couplet sets us seeking parallels between the poem's basic idea and the imaginative import of the other piece, towards which we are also verbally directed by the metaphor of pages being "opened" like liberating portals. But the thought-content here is somewhat dissimilar. In the other piece death is said to be the beneficent though misunderstood power ever busy to usher us into Eternity: here death's crowning role is stressed only to proclaim that what we consider death is just the life-power itself in one mode of its multifarious functioning, and the true form of this power is not what we usually recognise as life but another mode of vitality in comparison with which our so-called lease of vitality may be regarded as a living death.

Such is the broad theme. There is some ambiguity as to what exactly the other and greater mode of vitality is. On a simple reading we should understand it to be the existence after the body's dissolution and the "short death" to be the time before that end. But can we identify such a meaning as one of the "truths undreamed" which are now being brought out of the "long-hidden pages"? The life everlasting after death has been an accepted belief in many parts of the world for centuries. *The Fear of Death* gives tongue to the belief, as did verses by others before—from Shakespeare's

And Death once dead there's no more dying then,
through Donne's

One short sleep past we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more : Death, thou shalt die,

to Longfellow's

There is no death! What seems so is transition,
This life of mortal breath
Is but a suburb of the life elysian,
Whose portal we call death.

A percipient friend¹ opines: "I think the second part of the last line means some sudden shock to our ordinary career, which turns us to the spiritual life. 'Surprised' suggests the 'Hound of Heaven': Sri Aurobindo always uses 'surprised' in its original sense 'to be caught from behind'. At the stage of philosophical and spiritual development, when he wrote the poem, he could not have said that by mere physical death the true life could start." According to this view, both the words "life" and "death" have no longer to be construed in their ordinary opposite drifts but must be interpreted with the old Vedic and Vedantic insight newly disclosed. To this insight, all life without God-realisation is Death, and Immortality connotes a Yogic experience of the eternal and infinite bliss of the Divine in this very body of ours, and that Immortality is the true Life variously manifesting in our world, secretly present even in so-called death.

Whatever be the correct reading of Sri Aurobindo's couplet, paradoxes are having a gymnastic holiday there, and it is their mutual tensions which strike out impressive poetry in an epigrammatic *genre*. The intellectual style acquires a vivacity which reaches a point of implicit vision at the termination of either line: "disguised" and "surprised" prompt us to see and feel

¹ Ravindra Khanna, Professor of English, Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry, to whom, as well as to Nirodbaran, another Professor of English at the same institution, I owe several helpful hints.

the truth enunciated. Their end-places touch to happy cumulative finality the seeing and feeling. A further proof of the inspiration is the Alexandrine which the concluding line is, in contrast to the pentametrical flow of the antecedent five: the extra foot-length is a hint-echo of the message that our common existence is a span of brief mortality whereas what would put an end to it is the true life that goes on and on.

The couplet, however explained, is indeed praiseworthy. And yet it is not exactly the sheer poetic height of a great argument any more than the last eight lines of *The Fear of Death* mount, in their different vein, to such a consummation. Both attain an “upland” below the last pinnacle possible, such as the grand literary commingling of the reflective and the philosophical in that snatch from *Love and Death* which strikes out a super-Ciceronian *De Senectute*:

Not as a tedious evil nor to be
 Lightly rejected gave the gods old age,
 But tranquil, but august, but making easy
 The steep ascent to God. Therefore must Time
 Still batter down the glory and form of youth
 And animal magnificent strong ease,
 To warn the earthward man that he is spirit
 Dallying with transience, nor by death he ends,
 Nor to the dumb warm mother's arms is bound,
 But called unborn into the unborn skies.

Yes, the climaxes of our poems fall short of thought-vibrant outbursts of this kind which we may label pure excellence. And the concluding couplet of *Life and Death* is, from the poetic point of view, perhaps even an elevation lower than the second half of *The Fear of Death*; yet it is far removed from pleasant or attractive passableness. And it successfully proves what the

four lines preluding it might have been with a greater intensity of intuition breathed into the discursive strain which does not have a particular *penchant* for imagery.

A closing illustration of the three grades distinguished by us may be given by showing how a word which can have a pull downward from fineness and excellence may yet be transfigured. It is not only vocables acting more or less as abstract counters or, if possessed of life and light, failing to be completely unified in a collective organism's impassioned gesture, that exert the pull. It is also vocables in which the life and light have become faded in some measure by over-use in the past. An instance is the adjective "vernal". It has been an instrument of poetic diction since the time of Spenser. At its appearance in our day we should put ourselves on the alert, for the likelihood of a labour-saving articulation can arise with it. In *The Fear of Death* we saw it occur in an overflow from Shelley. We may cite two more occurrences which also seem not sufficiently impressive, though the second is part of a charming line-rhythm:

For I recall that day of vernal trees,
The soft asoca's bloom, the laden winds...

And shy as violets in the vernal grass...

The usages make poetry, but on a fair level only. Perhaps just a lift above it is felt in a phrase like

Attending with a pale and solemn light
Beyond the gardens of the vernal year...

However, a whiff of life blowing towards a fine upland comes in:

O was thy voice
A vernal repetition in some grove...?

And we get quite an enjoyable freshness in the semi-piquant usage:

Cowslip attends her vernal duty
And stops the heart with beauty...

But we come to definitely memorable poetry elsewhere—on at least three occasions. One is a bit on the luscious side but still revealingly forceful:

The vernal radiance of my lover's lips
Was shut like a red rose upon my mouth.

The fine verbal as well as rhythmic drive here will be better relished if juxtaposed with a less tense, more easily found poetic moment of the same mood:

Many a girl's lips ruby-red
With their vernal honey fed
Happy mouths...

The next occasion gripping the mind is not rich or voluptuous but economically suggestive in the absoluteness of its appeal to the beloved:

Turn hither for felicity.
My body's earth thy vernal power declares...

This is not only fine: it has the note of excellence. So too has the third occasion by a deft startling accompaniment of the traditional poeticism of the epithet with a ponderous abstract noun which suddenly springs into unforgettable vitality:

...And what needs Love in this pale realm...?

His vernal jurisdiction to bare Hell
Extends not...

The moral of all this varied exemplification is fourfold. First, even a born poet may have his comparative ups and downs. Secondly, the temptation downward comes mainly through an after-glow of the Romantic Movement or through an urge towards high thinking in verse. Thirdly, poetic inspiration can counteract the most down-pulling decorative or ratiocinative terms. Fourthly, a poet like Sri Aurobindo can afford to have his descents pointed out, for not only are they still poetry of some sort or other but he has a versatile power of recovery and the descents even in his early and middle periods are very few in proportion to the ascents. They are still fewer—practically nil—as sheer Light takes up more and more the poet in him into itself. After his arrival at Pondicherry from the political field we have sustained ascents, whether the theme be openly spiritual or not.

5

ILION: AN EPIC IN QUANTITATIVE HEXAMETERS

In the poetry of sheer spiritual Light we have two kinds of work by Sri Aurobindo. One makes an individual use of traditional forms: here the greatest achievement is the blank-verse *Savitri*. The other makes experiments in new forms: here the outstanding accomplishment is compositions solving the problem of quantitative metre which has baffled so many English poets. But these compositions are themselves of two kinds—those that deal with directly spiritual experiences and an unfinished epic of about five thousand lines, entitled *Ilion*, that is based on

Homer's theme in the *Iliad*. Only some four hundred and odd lines of this fragment were subjected to thorough revision by Sri Aurobindo, but the whole of it is memorable both as poetry and as technique. And even if this were not so and only the few thoroughly revised verses were worth attention, we should have to devote some space to them and to an exposition of their main metrical principles. For these verses are an astonishing piece and in general their metric applies also to other forms than theirs and the form they bear is itself central to the problem of quantity, attempting as it does to bring the Olympian pace of the ancient hexameter into English.

Sri Aurobindo holds it essential for the classical hexameter's typical pace that not only a suggestive rhythmical function but also a full metrical value should be given, as in the ancient languages, to quantity, to the time taken by the voice to pronounce the vowel on which a syllable is supported. English builds on stress, the vertical weight on a vowel. In quantity we deal with the horizontal vowel-mass. A word like "shadows" is by stress prominent in the first syllable; by quantity in the second. So it would seem that the two linguistic modes can be completely at loggerheads. One cannot blindly attempt to solve the problem by seeing to it that words are chosen so that quantity and stress may coincide. First of all, words like "poet" and "rival" in which they do coincide are not frequent enough to supply the basis of a metre: words like "mother" and "rivet" are quite frequent. Secondly, according to Sri Aurobindo, the unstressed long is the very soul of the quantitative movement. Unless it comes into its own in English, there can be in that tongue no avatar of the Greek or Latin harmony: to build the Homeric hexameter without it as an important part of a foot on many occasions is to miss Homer's tone and rhythm. But it cannot get its full value if stress dominates the metrical arrangement. Realising this, experimenters have tried to do away

with stress-value and built their lines totally on classical principles. But to un-stress English is to un-English the language. The one way out, in Sri Aurobindo's view, is: the metre must somehow assimilate stress to a quantitative system.

Sri Aurobindo suggests that, within a certain recent sphere of English poetic expression, this has already been done, though mostly in an unconscious way. The sphere is that of so-called Free Verse, where Whitman is the most impressive figure. Looking at "the greatest effects" with the new instrument, Sri Aurobindo¹ comments on Whitman and other writers: "we find that consciously or unconsciously they arrive at the same secret principle, and that is the essential principle of Greek choric and dithyrambic poetry turned to the law of a language which has not the strong resources of quantity. Arnold deliberately attempted such an adaptation but, in spite of beautiful passages, with scant success; still when he writes such a line as

The too vast orb of her fate,

it is this choric movement that he reproduces. Whitman's first poem in *Sea-Drift* and a number of others are written partly or throughout in this manner. When he gives us the dactylic and spondaic harmony of his lines,

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the ninth-month midnight,

one of them wanting only one foot to be a very perfect hexameter, or the subtly varied movement of this other passage,

Over the hoarse surging of the sea,
Or flitting from brier to brier by day,

¹ *The Future Poetry*, (Podicherry, 1953), pp. 214-16.

I saw, I heard at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,
The solitary guest from Alabama,

one has almost the rhythmical illusion of listening to a Sophoclean or Aeschylean chorus. In the opening stanzas of the noble *Prayer of Columbus*, there is a continuous iambic metrical stress, but with the choric movement. One finds the same thing sometimes in French *vers libre*,—one poem at least of the kind I have seen of wonderful beauty,—though the success is not so easy in that language. Tagore has recently attempted a kind of free verse in Bengali, not so good as his regular metres, though melodious enough, as everything must be that is written by this master musician of the word, and throughout there is the same choric or dithyrambic principle of movement. This then seems to be the natural high-water mark of free poetical rhythm; it is a use of the poetic principle of measure in its essence without the limitations of a set form.”

To trace in Free Verse a choric or dithyrambic movement as in the Greek masters is to imply that although this movement happens to be no straight imitation of its ancient original which was quantitative it adapts the natural disposition of a stressed language to that original. In brief: stress is taken up as if it created some kind of quantity along with quantitative combinations of the old type. We may see this by scanning two of the lines from Whitman:

Out of the | ninth-month | midnight...

I saw, | I heard at | intervals | the remain | ing one, |
the he-bird...

A third Whitman-line, from outside Sri Aurobindo's quotations, may be adjoined for being a full unconscious hexameter:

Silent, a|voiding the|moonbeams, |blending my|
 self with the|shadows.

Sri Aurobindo works out the conscious and complete theory of true English quantity in which stress suffers no cavalier dismissal and yet serves a quantitative end.

It can so serve, he says, because by its hammer-stroke on a syllable it masses the voice there and confers on it a special sort of length. Hence we may distinguish a length through vertical weight in addition to a length by horizontal volume. True quantity in English must reckon with two varieties of longs, that are valid under all circumstances. And in the genuine English hexameter—as also in other forms, like Sapphics and Alcaics—both the syllables of a word such as “shadows” must be taken, each for a different reason, as legitimately long.

A pair of important points emerges from this example. As the first half of “shadows” is, by classical measures, intrinsically short, a stress must be seen as constituting a long by vertical weight irrespective of the intrinsic quantity of a syllable. Not that a stressed intrinsic short is equal in value to the intrinsic long under the ictus; yet their difference is only a matter of *nuance* within the same prosodic category. Again, as the second half of “shadows” is, by English measures, a short—or a “slack”, as the current terminology goes—in spite of its intrinsic length, “slack”-shortness must be seen as no bar to length when the horizontal volume is present.

In the English hexameter, however, the classical rule about length accruing from a collection of consonants after a short vowel has to be scrapped except where the voice is naturally stretched out by them, as in the word “stretched” itself. In English, according to Sri Aurobindo, the voice is carried away by the stress from all “slack” syllables that are intrinsically

short: it is not allowed to dwell unless an intrinsic long meets it and, on some occasions, even the latter tends to be a little shortened. Hence, for example, to make the second syllable of “strident” long because of the two consonants at the end is to artificialise English. All the more is artificiality invited if we take a slack short vowel as lengthened by a throw-back influence from the opening consonant or consonants of the next word. To consider the preposition of a phrase like “loveliness of spring” as long because its *o* is followed not only by its own *f* but also by the *spr* of the next word is absurd. Words in English are individual units with a greater separateness and independence than in Greek and Latin where the inflections interconnect the words and where the voice is more uniformly and continuously spread out over the phrases. Even sensitive students of the language like Bridges have fallen into the error of employing spurious lengths as well as slurring over the stress-factor, just as poets like Longfellow have ignored the intrinsic long when unstressed. Avoiding either oversight, Sri Aurobindo reaches a form in tune both with the spirit of the classical languages and with the genius of English.

Along with syllables about which a clear rule can be laid down, there are many sounds in English which are doubtful or variable in quantity and some whose quantitative value may alter with position or some other circumstance. Sri Aurobindo wants the ear to be the sole judge in such cases and therefore a certain latitude is conceded to the poet.

As a result of all these factors the form Sri Aurobindo arrives at is much more plastic in foot-modulation than those of the past. Here plasticity is most necessary, since English, unlike Greek and Latin, is by nature prone to a diverse play on the metrical base. To un-English the hexameter by denying it that play on the ground that it will not duplicate the classical type is to see the structure and form of poetry with a scholarly instead

of a creative eye. The usual English type is a run of five dactyls (long-short-short) with a closing spondee (long-long) or trochee (long-short) and a spondaic or trochaic substitution anywhere in the line, except perhaps in the fifth foot. Sri Aurobindo, regarding stress as a part of quantity and admitting the unstressed long as vital to the technique, automatically gets other trisyllabic feet than the dactyl: for instance, the words "shadows of" would constitute for him an antibacchius (long-long-short). Nor then is there any reason why a non-dactylic trisyllable should contain one stress alone: there can be more than one stress in a foot, as in "fire leaping" or "golden fire" or "calm god-eyes". None of these, and still less four-syllabled feet, have any acknowledged role in the existing English hexameter. Sri Aurobindo legitimises them into organic effective components.

It might be objected in general that, English being a stress-language and tending to slur over the unstressed syllables, we introduce an artificiality by giving importance to unstressed intrinsic longs. But verse is always a departure, to some degree, from natural speech. And to read verse with complete naturalness is to make it lose all its *raison d'être*. Why adopt verse if it is to be read wholly like prose? Of course it must not be made sing-song or too artificial in any other way—and, even with the stress-system, we have always to cross the metrical pattern with the pattern of spoken language and not adhere strictly to the former. But some extra attention is to be given to the metrical pattern and in several other ways the reading of verse has to be a little "unnatural". Thus the line from Meredith's *Lucifer in Starlight*—

The army of unalterable law—

cannot afford to have "unalterable" read as usually spoken

in English. No doubt, it is composed of 5 syllables—or, more correctly, 4 whole ones and a final half—with the accent on the second, *al*, but the last three tend to be slurred together. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren,¹ after noting the latter fact, remark: “in the iambic pentameter line in which the word occurs in the poem, two of the regular metrical beats fall on alternative syllables of the word

unáalteráble.

This means that the entire word is given more force than is usual; and this is effective, because of the importance of the word in relation to the subject of the poem.” At least, in order to keep a five-foot scheme, the ordinary slurring together cannot and should not be done. Even the final half-syllable—*ble*—counts as a complete one. And the long quantity of a word like “able” in its first syllable—the long *a* which in speech becomes subdued in the occurrence of this dissyllable in the adjective “unalterable”—is restored in spite of the tendency in speech to pass over it because the main accent falls on *al*. What Sri Aurobindo’s quantity demands is similar departures from ordinary articulation. The departures may be less near in certain respects to those commonly made but they are in keeping with the essence of the latter and stem from the same principle as they.

In the lines from Landor’s *Rose Aylmer*—

A night of memories and signs
I consecrate to thee—

“the word ‘consecrate,’” say the authors of *Understanding Poetry*,² “is accented in ordinary usage on the first syllable.

¹ *Understanding Poetry* (New York, 1952), p. 327.

² P. 147.

But when the word is used in this poem, meter dictates an additional accent on the last syllable, for the line is to be scanned as follows:

ĩ cónsécráte tō thee.

Thus the metrical situation tends to give the word an emphasis which it would not possess in ordinary prose usage; and this is appropriate because of the importance of the word in the poem."

In the examples given so far, the syllables gaining full value have come in a position where a second accent could be given to them and they are themselves slurred longs. But once the claims of "the metrical situation" are conceded there is no reason why unstressed longs should not come into their own even when they stand next door to an accented syllable. Take "contemplative" as in Milton's

nor aught

By me proposed in life contemplative
Or active...

Here the word is accented on the second syllable and, wherever it is so accented, the *a* of the third syllable is, as a rule, pronounced like the first *a* in "awake". But what can prevent us in poetry from giving this *a* its full due if some metrical need calls for it? The prevention would be all the more arbitrary since an unstressed intrinsic long does not always lose its clear length even in spoken language: a word like "decade", stressed in the first syllable, retains its long *a* in the second, however slurred it may tend to be. The same holds for the *o* of the word we have already mentioned: "shadows". The *u* preceding the stressed syllable in "brutality" also stays long.

By analogy from such instances, all longs, be they distant from or next door to a stressed syllable, might be given their full value in a quantitative scheme like Sri Aurobindo's. No linguistic law of poetic expression would really be violated.¹

So much for the technique. But what is technique without the life-breath of inspiration? Sri Aurobindo's merit lies in providing at the same time an imaginative vitality and a plastic metrical mould readily responding to it. The two are adequate to all moods and moments. And the adequacy has the extra interest of being not only characteristically Aurobindonian but also recognisably Homeric in Homer's own metre. How it can be both we may understand by noting some remarks of Sri Aurobindo's on Whitman.

Whitman is part of the modern movement in which the mind has become complex and subtle—setting comprehensively to work, opening to various possibilities of truth, admitting a crowded stream and mass of interests. But he brings, says Sri Aurobindo,² into the stress and energy of his intellectual seeking "an element which gives them another potency and meaning.... He has the intimate pulse and power

¹ To appreciate in full and in all its nuances his conception of quantity and particularly of the hexameter one must read his long essay *On Quantitative Metre* included in *Collected Poems and Plays*, two volumes published in 1942. Here he touches also upon several problems related to poetry at large. An English reviewer, Banning Richardson, writing in *The Aryan Path* of March 1944, remarks about this "admirable essay" that it is "an essay which deserves wide currency and consideration by all those interested in the future of English poetry and of poetry in general". It is further remarked: "In it he seems to have struck at the root of the problem which modern poets have been attempting to solve by recourse to free verse forms. Both argument and example are convincing, and one wonders whether poets like Eliot, Auden and Spender have reached similar conclusions. At least, they should be made aware of this considerable contribution to English prosody by an Indian poet."

² *The Future Poetry*, pp. 253-5.

of life vibrating in all he utters, an almost primitive force of vitality, delivered from the enormous mechanical beat of the time by a robust closeness to the very spirit of life,—that closeness he has more than any other poet since ShakespeareBut...Whitman, by the intensity of his intellectual and vital dwelling on the things he saw and expressed, arrives at some first profound sense of the greater self of the individual, of the greater self in the community of the race and in all its immense past action opening down through the broadening eager present to an immenser future, of the greater self of Nature and of the eternal, the divine Self and Spirit of existence who broods over these things, who awaits them and in whom they come to the sense of their oneness. That which the old Indian seers called the *mahān ātmā*, the Great Self, the Great Spirit, which is seen through the vast strain of the cosmic thought and the cosmic life,...is the subject of some of his highest strains..."

Adverting to Whitman in the context of Free Verse, Sri Aurobindo¹ declares: "He is a great poet, one of the greatest in the power of his substance, the energy of his vision, the force of his style, the largeness at once of his personality and his universality. He is the most Homeric voice since Homer, in spite of the modern's ruder, less elevated aesthesis of speech and the difference between that limited Olympian and this broad-souled Titan, in this that he has the nearness to something elemental which makes everything he says, even the most common and prosaic, sound out with a ring of greatness, gives a force even to his barest or heaviest phrases, throws even upon the coarsest, dullest, most physical things something of the divinity; and he has the elemental Homeric power of sufficient straightforward speech, the rush too of oceanic sound

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

though it is here the surging of the Atlantic between continents, not the magic roll and wash of the Aegean around the isles of Greece. What he has not, is the unfailing poetic beauty and nobility which saves greatness from its defects—that supreme gift of Homer and Valmiki—and the self-restraint and obedience to a divine law which makes even the gods more divine.”

Thus, in Sri Aurobindo’s estimate, Whitman, with the help of his modern intellectualism, is a pioneer of things beyond the mind and is one who blends his contemporary thought not only with the ageless Indian perception but also with the Shakespearean throb and the Homeric attitude and intonation. *A fortiori* then can a giant at the same time of intellectuality and spirituality like Sri Aurobindo, with his vibrant touch on life and his mastery of that language of fire and ether which the Elizabethan age carried to its climax in Shakespeare, prove Homeric, particularly in the Greek poet’s own metrical mould, if we can show in him the qualities he reads in common between Homer and Whitman.

First let us take the American *vers-librist*’s elemental power of sufficient straightforward speech in spite of having a greater complexity and subtlety of mind than the ancient Greek. Has not Sri Aurobindo the same power even to a higher degree? *Ilion* begins majestically with a new day breaking over the besieged city and rousing once more the world:

...Earth in the dawn-fire delivered from starry and shadowy
vastness
 Woke to the wonder of life and its passion and sorrow and
beauty,
 All on her bosom sustaining, the patient compassionate
Mother.
 Out of the formless vision of Night with its look on things
hidden

Given to the gaze of the azure she lay in her garment of
greenness,
Wearing light on her brow...¹

Against a natural background of mystery without any mystification Sri Aurobindo sketches clearly and spontaneously the dawn's advent upon the beloved earth of mortals. But his spontaneity is as if primeval phenomena were themselves at large in its disclosures.

Next we may glance at the nearness to something elemental which makes everything come with a ring of greatness. Talthymbius, the messenger of Achilles to Troy, is briefly conjured up as he rides in his chariot to the just-stirring city:

Old and unarmed in the car was the driver ; grey was he,
shrunken,
Worn with his decades. To Pergama cinctured with strength
Cyclopean
Old and alone he arrived, insignificant, feeblest of mortals,
Carrying Fate in his helpless hands and the doom of an
empire.²

The very frailness, the very infirmity of the aged envoy seems to add to the momentousness of his mission: the drabness of his look, the prose of his posture are, as it were, lifted into glory and made the chief motif of the picture. A transfiguration of the commonplace is again there when Talthymbius is taken to a room to be refreshed before the Trojan people rise and meet in the morning to give their reply:

Brought to a chamber of rest in the luminous peace of the
mansion,

¹ *Ilion: An Epic in Quantitative Hexameters*. (Pondicherry, 1957), p. I.

² P. 2.

Women with travail racked for the child who shall rack
them with sorrow.¹

The irony here is of personal life; an irony of martial interrelations strikes its note, both stern and tragic, in the vision of death's day-to-day events in a war:

Ajax has bit at the dust; it is all he shall have of the Troad;
Tall Meriones lies and measures his portion of booty.²

Again and again, the drift of the least impulse, the lightest act, the most familiar situation is charged with the heroic, the high-souled, the unforgettable. This burdening of even the smallest casual turn we may indirectly describe through the two lines put into the mouth of Deiphobus about the sudden actualisation of Fate:

Always man's Fate hangs poised on the flitting breath of a
moment;
Called by some word, by some gesture it leaps, then 'tis
graven, 'tis granite.³

And these lines with their closing compactness and sublimity bring us to the verses that remain fastest in our memory—those where the thought or the image hurls upon us with a wide yet controlled grandeur as in Homer at his most energetically inspired. The impact, in one manner, is at its effective best in the harangues by Antenor, Laocoön and Paris in the Trojan assembly. These are masterpieces of political oratory that yet miss nothing of the poetic in the political and of the personal in the public, whether it is the old statesman who advises a

¹ P. 105. ² P. 38. ³ P. 25.

strategy of temporary surrender in order to prepare covertly
a future revolt—

Be as a cavern for lions;
Be as a Fate that crouches! Wordless and stern for your
vengeance
Self-gathered work in the night and the secrecy shrouding
your bosoms¹—

or it is the temple-rapt enthusiast with his huge reveries and
god-gilded delusions, brave with a desperate passion—

Storm is the dance of the locks of the God assenting to
greatness,
Zeus who with secret compulsion orders the ways of our
nature;...
Death? I have faced it. Fire? I have watched it climb in
my vision
Over the timeless domes and over the rooftops of Priam,
But I have looked beyond and have seen the smile of
Apollo...
Troy has arisen before, but from ashes, not shame, not
surrender!²—

or it is the young lover and warrior setting aside both caution
and self-censure and evoking happy confident heroism in what
seems a world of iron caprice—

Power is divine; divinest of all is power over mortals...
Conscious dimly of births unfinished hid in our being
Rest we cannot; a world cries in us for space and for
fullness...
All is injustice of love or all is injustice of battle...

¹ P. 33. ² P. 39-40.

You cannot utterly die while the Power lies untired in
bosoms;
When 'tis withdrawn, not a moment of life can be added by
virtue...
Proudly determine on victory, live by disaster unshaken.
Either Fate receive like men, nay, like gods, nay, like
Trojans.¹

The essential Homeric impact is no less when it is single-lined, as in the verse about the cripple god Hephaestus—the verse whose beginning is reminiscent of several of Homer's "Olympian descents" (*Bē de kat' oulumpoio...*):

Down upon earth he came with his lame omnipotent
motion.²

The rush of oceanic sound is here too about us. It grows immense as well as intense in a passage which we may prelude with an allusion to one of Homer's which Sri Aurobindo classes among the absolute and ultimate inevitabilities of poetry. It is a description of Apollo's earthward sweep, starting with the line:

Bē de kat' oulumpoio karēnōn chōōmenos kēr.

Sri Aurobindo³ comments: "Homer's passage translated into English would be perfectly ordinary. He gets the best part of his effect from his rhythm. Translated it would run merely like this: 'And he descended from the peaks of Olympus, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders arrows and doubly pent-in quiver, and there arose the clang of his silver bow as he moved,

¹ P. 48, 49. ² P. 121.

³ *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*: Third Series (Bombay, 194) , p. 16.

and he came made like unto the night.' His words too are quite simple but the vowellation and the rhythm make the clang of the silver bow go smashing through the world into universes beyond while the last words give a most august and formidable impression of godhead."

Sri Aurobindo's own poetic burst of "inevitability" may be divided into two parts. In the first the superhuman beings move before us in their outward forms and dynamisms:

...not only the mortal fighters,
 Heroes half divine whose names are like stars in remoteness,
 Triumphed and failed and were winds or were weeds on the
dance of the surges,
 But from the peaks of Olympus and shimmering summits
of Ida
 Gleaming and clanging the gods of the antique ages
descended.
 Hidden from human knowledge the brilliant shapes of
Immortals
 Mingled unseen in the mellay, or sometimes, marvellous,
maskless,
 Forms of undying beauty and power that made tremble
the heart-strings
 Parting their deathless secrecy crossed through the borders
of vision,
 Plain as of old to the demigods out of their glory emerging,
 Heard by mortal ears and seen by the eyeballs that perish.¹

This is Sri Aurobindo turned Homer—the Indian intimacy with occult presences is riding on the Aegean's "dance of the surges". Now comes Homer turned Sri Aurobindo. The inner consciousness which the depicted superhuman forms and dyna-

¹ P. 4.

misms symbolise and focus is evoked with all its tremendous breadth and plunge. The Greek "Immortals" are borne upon the heavenward heave of the profundities that are the Indian Ocean:

Mighty they came from their spaces of freedom and
sorrowless splendour.

Sea-vast, trailing the azure hem of his clamorous waters,
Blue-lidded, maned with the Night, Poseidon smote for the
future,

Earth-shaker who with his trident releases the coils of the
Dragon,
Freeing the forces unborn that are locked in the caverns of
Nature.

Calm and unmoved, upholding the Word that is Fate and
the order
Fixed in the sight of a Will foreknowing and silent and
changeless,

Hera sent by Zeus and Athene lifting his aegis
Guarded the hidden decree. But for Ilion, loud as the
surges,

Ares impetuous called to the fire in men's hearts, and his
passion

Woke in the shadowy depths the forms of the Titan and
demon;

Dumb and coerced by the grip of the gods in the abyss of
the being,

Formidable, veiled they sit in the grey subconscious
darkness

Watching the sleep of the snake-haired Erinnyes. Miracled,
haloed,

Seer and magician and prophet who beholds what the
thought cannot witness,

Lifting the godhead within us to more than a hum an
endeavour,
Slayer and saviour, thinker and mystic, leaped from his
sun-peaks
Guarding in Ilion the wall of his mysteries Delphic
Apollo.
Heaven's strengths divided swayed in the whirl of the
Earth-force.¹

A curious point in connection with these Aurobindonian illustrations of the Homeric rush of oceanic sound is the reference again and again to the sea. And the next passage which renders clear the reason of the long indecisive siege of Troy—the divine forces working out their own play through the human clashes—we have again the sea-simile for the to-and-fro of the war's fortunes:

Vain was the toil of the heroes, the blood of the mighty
was squandered,
Spray as of surf on the cliffs when it moans unappeased,
unrequited
Age after fruitless age.²

But finally the Gods withdrew, recognising the rules of 'Time's workings: "the anguish ends like the rapture." The Olympians,

Artists of Nature content with their work in the plan of
the transience,³

turned from the carnage,

¹ Pp. 4-5. ² P. 5 ³ *Ibid.*

Leaving the battle already decided, leaving the heroes
 Slain in their minds, Troy burned, Greece left to her
 glory and downfall.

And, while they reposed in their blissful ether,

Lifted was the burden laid on our wills by their starry
 presence:
 Man was restored to his smallness, the world to its incon-
 scient labour.
 Life felt a respite from height, the winds breathed freer
 delivered;
 Light was released from their blaze and the earth was
 released from their greatness.
 But their immortal content from the struggle titanic departed.
 Vacant the noise of the battle roared like the sea on the
 shingles;
 Wearily hunted the spears their quarry; strength was
 disheartened;
 Silence increased with the march of the months on the tents
 of the leaguer.¹

Here too the ocean-comparison figures. And we discover that Sri Aurobindo was aware of the association of Homer and sea, for he has in more than one place introduced a reflex of Homer's most famous line apropos of the Aegean's roll and cry:

Βε δ' ακεόν παρα θίνα πολυφλοῖς βοῖο θαλάσσης.

Sri Aurobindo has himself even Englished this line with the true Homeric blend of simplicity and splendour:

Silent he walked by the shore of the many-rumoured ocean.²

¹ Pp. 5-6. ² *Letters*, p. 47.

Haunted by the mute sorrow of Chryses, Apollo's high-priest, listening to the ocean's roar, Sri Aurobindo makes Achilles say in his message through Talthybius:

Day after day I walked at dawn and in blush of the sunset,
Far by the call of the seas and alone with the gods and my
dreaming.¹

Again Achilles voices his solitude—and now with a direct memory of Homer Sri Aurobindo gives him the words:

Lonely I paced o'er the sands by the thousand-throated
waters.²

And in the closing phrase here Sri Aurobindo has produced after Homer's *poluphlois boio thalassēs* the grandest poetic *multum in parvo* about the sea in terms of a modern mind's complexity of verbal art which yet has an elemental force.

We may add that the same is true in connection with Homer's evocation of the rhythm of Apollo's silver bow. What Sri Aurobindo remarks of its tremendous suggestion we may repeat about his own phrase at the end of an account of the Sun-god leaving the divine mountain in suppressed anger because Zeus denies him continuance of his supremacy and decides the future in favour of Pallas Athene. A more psychological tinge is imparted by Sri Aurobindo with a symbolic gleam, but a "smashing through the world into universes beyond" is Homerically achieved through sheer pressure of poetic sound:

Clang of his argent bow was the wrath restrained of the
mighty.³

¹ *Ilion*, p. 12. ² *Ibid.*, p. 14. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

When we encounter in *Ilion* either one-line masterpieces or sustained perfections, we cannot help somewhat modifying Sri Aurobindo's Homeric apotheosis of Whitman. For, in such excerpts as we have made, we have on the whole an aesthesis finer than that broad-souled Titan's—and there is in addition the absence of the one un-Homeric feature in Whitman, the intermittent poetic beauty and nobility. The more concentrated exaltation of metrical rhythmic movement, without which "even his greatest things do not go absolutely and immediately home, or having entered they do not so easily seize on the soul, take possession and rest in a calm yet vibrating mastery," is constantly with Sri Aurobindo, ensuring a greater total Homerism.

However, the worth of *Ilion* lies ultimately in this Homerism being Aurobindonian without ceasing to be itself. What is unique is that the spirit of Greek myth and epic goes hand in hand with the spirit of Indian Yoga: flawless word and rhythm embody a vision packed with the light of the occult Orient yet tempered and naturalised to the atmosphere of heroic Hellas. The uniqueness shows out most in the lines where a deeper sense of the Divine is expressed than Helen-drunk Paris or even religion-intoxicated Laocoön can reach for all their instinct of powers beyond man. There is then a pressing forward to a large picture of Heaven's dealings with earth. Apart from the passage about the Gods joining the mellay and a few others, perhaps this sense comes closest to us in the declarations of Gods and Goddesses when Zeus summons them together in Book VIII. Apropos of Zeus himself Sri Aurobindo says:

Not alone the mind in its trouble
God beholds, but the spirit behind that has joy of the torture.
Might not our human gaze on the smoke of a furnace, the
burning

Red, intolerable, anguish of ore that is fused in the hell-heat,
Shrink and yearn for coolness and peace and condemn all
the labour?

Rather look to the purity coming, the steel in its beauty,
Rather rejoice with the master who stands in his gladness
accepting

Heat of the glorious god and the fruitful pain of the iron.¹

Among the speeches given to Zeus a passage affords a rare insight into the nature of the deific. When Hera says that Zeus's sons Apollo and Ares forget the supreme purpose, he replies :

“Hera, queen of the heavens, they forget not, but choose to
be mindless.

This is the greatness of gods that they know and can put
back the knowledge;

Doing the work they have chosen they turn not for fruit nor
for failure.

Griefless they walk to their goal and strain not their eyes
towards the ending.

Light that they have they can lose with a smile, not as souls
in the darkness

Clutch at every beam and mistake their one ray for all
splendour.

All things are by Time and the Will eternal that moves us.

And for each birth its hour is set in the night or the dawning.

There is an hour for knowledge, an hour to forget and to
labour.”²

In the course of this Book we have even a direct reminiscence of spiritual India. Narrating how the Gods and Goddesses

¹ P. 105. ² P. 110.

called by Zeus ascend to him through various subtle kingdoms, he pictures their entry into the Mind-world which from its own splendours looks up to a greater Light and to

bliss from ineffable kingdoms

Where beyond Mind and its rays is the gleam of a glory
supernal:
There our sun cannot shine and our moon has no place for
her lustres,
There our lightnings flash not, nor fire of these spaces is
suffered.¹

Sri Aurobindo has here rendered some famous phrases of the Mundaka Upanishad.

Such passages may leave us most satisfied, but we should not miss in our love of them the fact that *Ilion* develops in a new way part of the story of Troy after the death of Hector and the coming of the Eastern Queen Penthesilea to the city's succour. *Ilion* deals with the events on the last day of the siege of Troy. The nature of these events and the many-sided play they involve of physical circumstance, human character, psychological motive, individual action, no less than hidden world-forces and inscrutable destiny, may be inferred from the names of the several sections of the poem: we have Books successively of the Herald, the Statesman, the Assembly, Partings, Achilles, the Chieftains, the Woman, the Gods—and a final unnamed Book presumably of Battle and Doom.

Ilion is a true epic in breadth and depth and height. If any one work of Sri Aurobindo's could be the spearhead of his poetic fame in the West, it should be *Ilion*. Unfortunately, there has been little open appreciation so far, in spite of enthusiastic pronouncements in private by men like Christopher

¹ P. 108.

Martin, once assistant editor of *Encounter*, and by the eminent art-critic and thinker, Sir Herbert Read. Martin wrote: "I certainly am impressed by this masterly achievement in hexameters" (Letter, December 9, 1959). Sir Herbert stated: "Sri Aurobindo's *Ilion* is a remarkable achievement by any standard and I am full of amazement that someone not of English origin should have such a wonderful command not only of our English language as such, but of its skilful elaboration into poetic diction of such high quality" (Letter, June 5, 1958).

6

SHEER SPIRITUAL LIGHT—"OVERHEAD POETRY"—

SONNETS, LYRICS, COMPOSITIONS

IN NEW METRES

Sri Aurobindo's latest work is the most unique he has done, but its deepest characteristic is not its new metre. This characteristic is equally patent in his recent poetry within the general bounds of traditional technique. To evaluate it effectively we have to speak in terms of planes of consciousness. And it will not suffice just to dub it mystical. No doubt, mystical poetry has a psychology distinct from that of poetry that is secular, but in literature mysticism itself functions on various planes. Whatever its sources, the expression it finds may very well be on the same planes as those of secular inspiration—the planes of imaginative passion and thought. When Donne acts the vehement devotee—

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine and seek to mend,

or Crashaw cries *de profundis* to St. Teresa, echoing her exaltation—

By the full kingdom of that final kiss
That seized thy parting soul and sealed thee His,
By all the heavens thou hast in Him
(Fair sister of the Seraphim!),
By all of Him we have in thee,
Leave nothing of myself in me,

or Gerard Manley Hopkins quiveringly flashlights the life within a religious discipline, “closed by a cassock and dedicate to God”—

I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed rod;
Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
Thy terror, O Christ, O God;
Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:
The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
Hard down with a horror of height:
And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of
stress,

or Eliot subtly symbolises the supreme religious consummation of love in which all intensities come together and are uplifted and opposites get reconciled—

When the tongues of fire are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one,

spiritual realities are clothed in a language and rhythm whose turns and tones might serve equally well the realities of life's

habitual experience. The mental eye is ranging over the Unknown and shaping it to significances and figures and values that are bathed in an element familiar to us. Indeed all poetry has to establish some sort of contact with familiar things, but a world of difference lies between the Unknown being gripped by our customary consciousness and our customary consciousness being gripped by the Unknown. In the latter phenomenon, not only the meaning but the very words and their combined vibrations seem to leap from entranced God-inhabited heights: the Divine and the Eternal find their own speech, large, luminous, fathomless—the meaning becomes visioned and felt as though man were no longer mental merely but poised on a level beyond mind. This type of poetry Sri Aurobindo calls “overhead”, because it comes as if by a wide sweeping descent from an ether of superhuman being, high above our mind’s centre in the brain.

It has not been absent from English literature: Vaughan, Wordsworth, Shelley, Francis Thompson and AE have it perhaps more frequently, but no English poet has proved continually a channel of its peculiar intensity. For that matter it is no more than sporadic in all languages except Sanskrit. And, even in Sanskrit, parts of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita stand alone as its embodiment *en masse*. To be holy scripture is not necessarily to be overhead with the revelatory rhythm with which the Indian Rishis often uttered their realisations. As a rule, the world’s Bibles ring the note of Donne or Crashaw or Herbert, Hopkins or Eliot or other fine English poets turned mystics. Most of the existing religious and spiritual literature is wanting in the accent which leads up to what the Rishis considered the culminating speech of mysticism, the *mantra*—the accent we repeatedly find, for instance, in a poem like Sri Aurobindo’s *Descent* where in seven Sapphic quatrains built on his own principles of quantity there is conveyed the Yogic

process in which the Spirit's substance comes from remote altitudes into the human mould and of which a part is the overhead inspiration for those who are poetically receptive. Even lines which, taken separately, would not be overhead are caught up beyond themselves by the *ensemble* and the suffused overhead tone getting dense every now and then forms a climax of spiritual creativity in stanzas 4 and 5—

Swiftly, swiftly crossing the golden spaces
Knowledge leaps, a torrent of rapid lightnings;
Thoughts that left the Ineffable's flaming mansions,
Blaze in my spirit.

Slow the heart-beats' rhythm like a giant hammer's;
Missioned voices drive to me from God's doorway
Words that live not save upon Nature's summits,
Ecstasy's chariots.

These eight lines make a most magnificent composite picture, Vedic and Upanishadic in its symbols, and the sound-strokes of the words leave reverberations that are mantric: the impulsion of the supreme Spirit is poetised in language and rhythm with an immediate direct play of superhuman immensities at their utmost instead of an indirect one through their adaptation to the mind's climate.

It is not always easy to distinguish the overhead style or to get perfectly the drift of its suggestion. There must be as much as possible a stilling of ourselves, an in-drawn hush ready to listen to the uncommon speech; and we must help the hush to absorb successfully that speech by repeatedly reading the verse aloud, since it is primarily through the rhythm that the psychological state with which an overhead poem is a-thrill echoes within us, stirring the eye to open wider and wider on spiritual

mysteries and the brain to acquire a more and more true reflex of the transcendental that is the truth of things, waiting for manifestation.

The rhythm more than anything else is also what makes a gradation in overhead poetry. In Sri Aurobindo's work of this species it is difficult to demarcate the stages, for a general breath of the *mantra* seems to blow almost everywhere; but we may attempt a rough classification. According to him, above the mind-level four stages of mystical experience can be distinguished, which have found occasional embodiment, either distinct or interpenetrated, in human languages: a rare fifth, called by him Supermind and considered the ultimate goal of the Yoga taught by him, still awaits its hour of manifestation. Immediately higher than the reflective intelligence is a plane of thought, termed Higher Mind, which is not conceptive from outside its object but is projected from a Spirit-stuff which secretly pervades everything. Rising from that pervasion it comes charged with a broad and strong clarity of conception from the inside, resembling certain lofty outbursts of the ideative mind proper but differing by a vibration-frequency, so to speak, no less than by a directness of spiritual sense. When Sri Aurobindo writes—

I have drunk the Infinite like a giant's wine,

or

My thoughts shall be hounds of light for Thy power to
loose,

we may say he captures the accent of the first level. To appreciate the capture we may listen to a fine *à peu près* in Valéry's symbolisation of the pure intellect, contemplative, aloof, absolute to itself:

Midi là-haut, Midi sans mouvement...
Tête complète et parfait diadème.

(Midday on high, Midday all motionless...
Head without flaw and perfect diadem.)

In the next grade, designated Illumined Mind, there is a keenness of lustre accompanying the amplitude, revealing not only the shape of the Spirit under all guises but also its colour and texture, its tense or tingling subtleties. A typical example in Sri Aurobindo of this level seems:

A red and bitter seed of the raptures seven,

or

Black fire and gold fire strove towards one bliss.

The typicality may be seen better by comparing the examples with a brilliant approximation to their level in Yeats's

O martyrs standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall.

The stage after this is named Intuition, a specific power which must not be confused with its own inferior forms in the swift graspings or discriminations possible to our intelligence at times. It brings a sharp and packed intimacy, a seeing as if with eyes closed in absorbed "empathy", a deep listening as if to the world's heart through one's own. Lustrousness is not the usual attribute of such utterance, a straightforward speech is sufficient though touches of fire may come here and there in the intense self-revealing breadths. As instances from Sri Aurobindo, take

A Calm that cradles Fate upon its knees,

or

I am alone with my own self for space.

The full Intuition may strike out at us clearer if set beside
an admirable near-hit in Rilke's

Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum:
Weltinnenraum.

(A single space spreads through all things that are,
World's inner space).¹

Beyond spiritual speech of the intuitional order we have the word of Overmind, the plane which in Sri Aurobindo's system of Yogic philosophy is the immediate delegate of the hitherto unmanifested Supermind, that utter Divinity which holds the key to man's integral perfection, even the perfection of his physical being. The Overmind word is the *mantra*. Here any of the characteristics of the preceding levels may be transfigured by a rhythm that is *sui generis* or else new characteristics may emerge that defy analysis. The rhythm is as of the supreme Spirit realised by more than profound intimacy—realised by veritable identity. In the following quatrain, cast in quantitative trimeters and chanting forth the integral ideal which Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is bent upon in his Ashram at Pondicherry, we have in the first line an extremely moved soaring of overhead intuitive "empathy", in the second a most vivid uplifting of overhead sight, in the third a superb sublimation of overhead thought and in the

¹ Adapted from C. M. Bowra's translation.

fourth a mingling of all the three overhead modes below Overmind and their being rapt beyond themselves to some indefinable *n*th degree :

Arms taking to a voiceless supreme delight,
Life that meets the Eternal with close breast,
An unwall'd mind dissolved in the Infinite,
Force one with unimaginable rest.

The quatrain is *mantra* by an expansion of the meaning to a sovereign massiveness of immeasurable suggestion, an endlessness of undertone and overtone as though each line which appears to terminate went really sounding on from everlasting to everlasting because what it embodies is—with some sort of absoluteness proper to Supermind's immediate delegate—the Divine and the Deathless, the Light that has neither flaw nor bound.

These four lines are a good illustration too of the fact that the overhead speech is not concerned only with superhuman magnitudes but is capable of conveying an intense emotion: the throb of the human is never cast away by Sri Aurobindo, he gathers up again and again the cry of things that perish and breathes into it the truth of all our travail, which is the Divine's desire that He should be embodied in our earthly members and not merely that we should ascend to His summits. When Sri Aurobindo invokes, in *Musa Spiritus*, the "Word concealed in the upper fire", he calls on it to leap into "the gulfs of our nature":

In the uncertain glow of human mind,
Its waste of unharmonied thronging thoughts,
Carve thy epic mountain-lined
Crowded with deep prophetic grots.

And in his most incantatory poem, *Rose of God*, an experiment in pure stress metre, where a symbol famous in mystical verse and steeped in exquisite associations by Yeats in our own day—

...Your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart...

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days...

Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose—

is suffused with the sight and sound of the overhead and even the mantric, every stanza connects by a half esoteric half intimate imagery Supernature's heights and Nature's depths. Lines 5-8 may serve as an illustration, playing a variation on the theme of our excerpt from *Musa Spiritus*:

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being,
Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing!
Live in the mind of our earthhood: O golden Mystery, flower,
Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous
Hour.

Yes, Sri Aurobindo never contemns earth, since he deems it the ordained scene of an evolution in which its own terms will not just be transcended but purified and fulfilled, discovering a solution rather than a dissolution for—in those piercing words of Bloc—

All this life's pitiable trembling,
All this uncomprehended fire.¹

¹ Translated by C.M. Bowra.

Within the imperfect parts of our terrestrial existence Sri Aurobindo sees a spark of the Divine—the psychic being, as he terms it—which is all perfection in embryo and which acts at present indirectly through a general influence on mind, life-force and body but has to be brought forward into their midst and made to grow an open link between the Divine and the human and a focal starting-point for the latter's ultimate irradiation by the former. This secret psyche is a most poignant intensity and its pure emotion such as enters strongly into several lines of *Rose of God* infuses often into Sri Aurobindo's overhead grandeurs, either openly or from the background, its strange sweetness or its wistfulness that is yet never weak or escapist. When it comes to the fore, effects of a ravishing magic are produced, as in its mixing with the Illumined Mind in the second verse of that couplet from the rhymed quantitative hexameters of *Ahana*—

Open the barriers of Time, the world with thy beauty
enamour.

Trailing behind thee the purple of thy soul and the dawn-
moment's glamour...,

or with the Intuition in the first verse of another couplet from the same poem—

Ever we hear in the heart of the peril a flute go before us,
 Luminous beckoning hands in the distance invite and
implore us.

What is perhaps Sri Aurobindo's most moving mystical poem, *A God's Labour*, has throughout its thirty-one stanzas the stamp of the psyche all over its sublime overhead vision, cast into a directly personal mould, of the mission of one who would build a bridge "marrying the soil to the sky":

He who would bring the heavens here
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way...

I have been digging deep and long
Mid a horror of filth and mire
A bed for the golden river's song,
A home for the deathless fire...

I saw that a falsehood was planted deep
At the very root of things
Where the grey Sphinx guards God's riddle sleep
On the Dragon's outspread wings...

I have delved through the dumb Earth's dreadful heart
And heard her black mass' bell.
I have seen the source whence her agonies part
And the inner reason of hell...

He who I am was with me still;
All veils are breaking now.
I have heard His voice and borne His will
On my vast untroubled brow...

A little more and the new life's doors
Shall be carved in silver light
With its aureate roof and mosaic floors
In a great world bare and bright...

Something of this tone also streams now and again into the sequence of more than fifty sonnets in which Sri Aurobindo has voiced a few of his spiritual realisations in a language either exquisitely simple or passionately rich but always with a

straightforwardness in keeping with the autobiographical motif which here more than in most other self-revealing poems of his is felt by the reader. A feature often to be noted in these sonnets is the extremely close approximation the overhead speech makes to the language we have defined to be of the customary consciousness gripping the Unknown as differentiated from that of the Unknown gripping the customary consciousness. Now we have to recognise a third category which seems to be this consciousness's speech not merely touched by the overhead, as happens at times in Sri Aurobindo's earlier philosophic or other verse, but unified with it and yet not so much assimilated into the specific tones of Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition or Overmind as itself assimilating them. Its own mode remains, but within the possibilities of that mode the overhead is fully exploited instead of new possibilities being created by the overhead's transfiguration of it. It frequently passes over into sheer Spiritual Light, yet again and again a note is heard which can be distinguished both from the overhead which we have already illustrated and from the several shades of the customary—for instance, the forceful reflective in a mystical mood as in that close to a sonnet of 1899 on the poet's grandfather whose "strong and sentient spirit" he conceives as having been drawn back at death into the "omnipresent Thought" of which it was "a part and earthly hour":

...Into that splendour caught
Thou hast not lost thy special brightness. Power
Remains with thee and the old genial force
Unseen for blinding light, not darkly lurks:
As when a sacred river in its course
Dives into ocean, there its strength abides
Not less because with vastness wed and works
Unnoticed in the grandeur of the tides.

A fine example of the note in question, at play amidst the pure overhead accent, is the sonnet *The Godhead* which faithfully records a very early experience when Sri Aurobindo was in danger of a carriage accident in Baroda in the first year of his stay there, a vision of the Godhead surging up from within him and mastering and controlling with its gaze all events and surroundings:

I sat behind the dance of Danger's hooves
In the shouting street that seemed a futurist's whim,
And suddenly felt, exceeding Nature's grooves,
In me, enveloping me the body of Him.

Above my head a mighty head was seen,
A face with the calm of immortality
And an omnipotent gaze that held the scene
In the vast circle of its sovereignty.

His hair was mingled with the sun and breeze;
The world was in His heart and He was I;
I housed in me the Everlasting's peace,
The strength of One whose substance cannot die.

The moment passed and all was as before;
Only that deathless memory I bore.

Another striking example is *The Pilgrim of the Night* which links up in experience with *A God's Labour*. In passing to it, we may note two complementary aspects of Sri Aurobindo's God-realisation: one is in the line from the sonnet already cited,

The world was in His heart and He was I—

the other is in that cryptic startling phrase in *A God's Labour*,

He who I am was with me still.

Both the aspects are hinted in *The Pilgrim of the Night* where "He who I am" remains, though the transcendent and universal Divinity had to be left in the background when Sri Aurobindo addressed himself to the work of not merely attaining what he has called Supermind but also of diving into what he has termed the Inconscient, the nether pole to the Absolute's upper pole of total Light, the utter darkness of stonelike insensibility which marks the Divine's complete apparent self-loss for the sake of a novel laborious and dangerous self-discovery, the brute blindness in which everything lies "involved" and from which power after power is evolved under the pressure of and invasion by the higher planes where the same powers stand freely expressed:

I made an assignation with the Night;
In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous:
In my breast carrying God's deathless light
I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo.
I left the glory of the illumined Mind
And the calm rapture of the divinised soul
And travelled through a vastness dim and blind
To the grey shore where her ignorant waters roll.
I walk by the chill wave through the dull slime
And still that weary journeying knows no end;
Lost is the lustrous godhead beyond Time,
There comes no voice of the celestial Friend,
And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality.

In many respects, these fifty sonnets or so are the best brief approach for us to *Savitri*, the gigantic epic which Sri Aurobindo subtitled “a Legend and a Symbol” and which may in addition be described as “a Philosophy” and in which all the varieties of spiritual speech we have tried to discriminate attain their royal manifestation. For here we have not only the element of spiritual autobiography that, in a non-personal narrative shape, is found worked into that poem in detailed abundant vividness. We have also the element of spiritual philosophy found there in the form of general ideas set shining through the Yogi’s silent mind by what arrives from overhead—a thought-structure expressing a mystical vision and contact and knowledge which have come by processes of consciousness other than intellectual. Again, the sustained pentameter anticipates the five-foot mould of *Savitri* and the sparse enjambment renders the anticipation even more a fore-glimpse. Of course, *Savitri* is blank verse, but when the Shakespearean rather than the Miltonic sonnet-scheme is here followed—and it is followed frequently—the last two lines of a quatrain seem to create with the first two of its successor an effect somewhat as of a snatch of concealed blank verse: for instance,

Failure is cradled on Thy deathless arm,
 Victory is Thy passage mirrored in Fortune’s glass.
 In the rude combat with the fate of man
 Thy smile within my heart is all my strength.

Also, there is a fair amount of significant modulation—spondaic, anapaestic, dactylic, trochaic or pyrrhic—on the iambic base to recall to a degree the blank-verse technique:

\sim / x x / / \ x / /
 I walk | by the | chill wave | through the | dull slime...

/ x x x x / x / x x / x /
 Victory | is Thy pas|sage mir|rored in For|tune's glass...

x / / x x x / x x / x /
 And bright | suddenness | of wings | in a gol|den air...

/ x \ x / / x x x /
 Man on | whom the | World-Unity | shall seize...¹

No doubt, the lyric tone is much in evidence in the Sonnets, but in *Savitri* too it is not absent. Besides, the architectural sequence and progression proper to the sonnet-form, with the finality as of a semi-logical demonstration at the end in a swift couplet or in a deliberate resolving movement of three lines, tend by themselves to introduce something of the graver, more strongly cut and more marshalled power of epic construction, even when the poised element of spiritual philosophy and the dynamic element of spiritual autobiography are not together directly in front to contribute an epic tone affined to that of *Savitri*.

¹ This line would scan differently if the first foot is truncated to a single stressed syllable.

SAVITRI*

SOME GLIMPSES AND REFLECTIONS

On August 15, 1954, the eighty-second birthday of Sri Aurobindo, a most splendid offering to the Master was the one-volume edition brought out by the Ashram of his greatest poetic achievement—*Savitri, a Legend and a Symbol*—over which he had worked for, we may say, almost his lifetime. It is on record that Virgil devoted approximately ten years to his *Aeneid*, Dante sixteen intermittently and six wholly to his *Divina Commedia*, Milton at least eight to *Paradise Lost* and Goethe spread the writing of his *Faust*, with long intervals, over nearly fifty years of crowded life. Sri Aurobindo's occupation with his masterpiece is comparable in time-span to Goethe's—and his too was a life variously crowded, at the beginning with political events, afterwards with mystical realisations and inner discoveries and partly with the writing of a dozen books philosophical or literary on a large scale. But it was not merely lack of sparetime or even a desire to put the maximum of available life-experience into the poem, that made it cover fifty years or so. Unlike any of the other epic poets Sri Aurobindo made recast after recast, not merely addition on addition—and it was rarely because the early versions wanted in pure poetic merit that he did this: his aim was primarily to lift the work to the highest and most comprehensive expression possible of spiritual realities within the scheme

* Part of this essay is taken up into *The Poet of Integralism*, first published in *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, A Commemorative Symposium edited by Haridas Chaudhuri and Frederic Spiegelberg (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1960) and afterwards included with some enlargement in the author's *The Vision and Work of Sri Aurobindo* (Mother India, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1968).

set up by him of character, incident and plot.

This aim and the artistic method employed for achieving it were to be explained in a long Introduction which he intended to write to the complete *Savitri*. Mostly, *Savitri* was meant to create in massive proportions the kind of poetry that, in his published literary criticisms, he used to designate as hailing from "Overhead" planes—the ranges of consciousness broadly envisaged by ancient Indian scriptures as lying hidden above the human and possessing an inherent light of knowledge and a natural experience of the infinite. He distinguished in general a progression of four levels as having found rare voice in the world's literature and art: Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind. A fifth and highest plane, which he named Supermind and whose realisation above on its own peaks and ultimate descent below into the physical being are the aim of his own "Integral Yoga", was regarded by him as not having directly manifested yet.

The absence cannot help being regretted of what would have been a unique expository and elucidative document on the unusual poetic afflatus—unusual in both message and music—that blows through the nearly twenty-four thousand lines of this Legend of the past that he has presented as a Symbol of the future. Luckily, however, we have a substantial number of letters by him on his epic. Out of them an informal commentary has been compiled and put after the text with the object of throwing in the poet's own precious words some light on the poem's conception and development and on its qualities of inspiration, vision, style and technique. This commentary, which is now longer by a further sheaf of letters than when first published separately and follows a scheme of grouping differing in several respects from the one adopted then, serves also to add to the description of the Overhead planes given by Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri* itself as well as in his philosophical work

The Life Divine and to clarify certain aspects of their role in poetic creation. It etches memorably on our minds what the author calls the metaphysical psychology of the new art inspired by the extraordinary experiences and significances that have gone to the making of his poem and, in seeking affinities for this art, it ranges over a wide terrain of world-poetry and gives us vivid illustration, penetrating analysis, suggestive evocation—*aesthetic sensitiveness, intellectual grasp and spiritual insight moving harmoniously together.*

Of course the letters, extending over eighteen years and often touching on various subjects at a time or dealing with the same subject at different times, could not always be arranged chronologically and in a regular series to make a continuous exposition. They have been sorted into sections, each section determined mostly by similarity of theme in its contents or by their broad subsumableness under a common head. One section has been specially devoted to comments on individual lines, phrases and words given as far as possible in the order of their occurrence in the poem. The order of the sections as well as of their contents has been dictated in the main by the consideration of either logical or textual sequence.

A short Note prefacing the wonderful letters gives us some valuable information on the way the poem was actually composed and finished. Not the least interesting and meaningful part of this Note is the quotation of some of the very last lines dictated by Sri Aurobindo—lines which strike one as being pregnant with a foreknowledge of the end at a time when there were no physical pointers to it and with a symbolic prefiguring of the spiritual situation that on his departure from his own body would face his comrade and co-worker in the Integral Yoga—the Mother.

Both in quality and quantity *Savitri* must be counted as remarkable even among the world's remarkable achievements.

With its 23,813 lines,¹ it is the longest poem in the English language, beating *The Ring and the Book* of Browning with its 21,116 to the place of runner-up: in fact it is the longest in any European language old or new, with the exception of Nicos Kazantzakis's recently published *Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, written originally in present-day Greek and running into 33,333 lines. Among epics which can be compared with it in general poetic quality, only the *Shāh-Nāmeh*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* exceed it in length—three works which, like it, are products of the East. And indeed *Savitri* stands with the masterpieces of Valmiki and Vyasa in more than one respect. It has been conceived with something of the ancient Indian temperament which not only rejoiced in massive structures but took all human life and human thought into the spacious scope of its poetic creations and blended the workings of the hidden worlds of Gods and Titans and Demons with the activities of earth. A cosmic sweep is *Savitri*'s and Sri Aurobindo wanted his poem to be a many-sided multi-coloured carving out, in word-music, of the gigantic secrets of his "supramental Yoga".

With the *Mahābhārata* it has a direct link too. For, it is based on a story, in that epic, of a victorious fight by love against death. Such a fight is a theme that haunted Sri Aurobindo from his very youth, as is proved by his early narrative *Love and Death* which is somewhat similar in outward intention as well as based on an episode in the same ancient Indian epos. That other narrative of his twenties—*Urvashi*—is also a variant of the identical theme, since, though there is no death in it, it poetises a triumphant struggle against the fate which circumscribes mundane life and snatches away the beloved. As we know, *Savitri* itself was first drafted quite early

¹ Now adjudged to be a few less because some have been recognised as being alternative versions whose more natural place would be in footnotes than in the text.—K.D.S. (1970)

in Sri Aurobindo's poetic career and, in it, the recurrent theme takes a form that clearly shows it to be bound up with Sri Aurobindo's own work in the world. The poem's heroine grew in detailed depth with each of the nearly twelve recasts he made in order to lift the meaning and music ever higher until they should press everywhere towards what the old Rishis had called the *mantra* and arrive again and again at this speech that Sri Aurobindo has distinguished as one in which the vision, the word, the rhythm are born with an intense wideness and unfathomable massiveness from the Overmind. Here Savitri of the *Mahābhārata* fighting the God of Death who had taken away her consort Satyavan became more and more an Avatar of the eternal Beauty and Love plunging into the trials of terrestrial life and seeking to overcome them not only in herself but also in the world she had embraced as her own: she was sworn to put an end to earth's ignorant estrangement from God—estrangement whose most physical symbol is Death, the bodily opposite of the luminous inherent immortality of the Divine. Her story constitutes now a poetic structure in which Sri Aurobindo houses his special search and discovery, his uttermost exploration of hidden worlds, his ascent into the top ranges of the Spirit, his bringing down of their power to divinise man's total nature. And the figure of Savitri suggests in general his own companion in the field of Yoga, the Mother, who is at present carrying on the great task set by the Master.

The technique of *Savitri* is attuned to the scriptural conception at work. The iambic five-foot line of blank verse is adopted as the most apt and plastic for harmonies like those of the Vedas and the Upanishads. The blank verse, however, is given certain special characteristics affining it still further to them. It moves in a series of blocks formed by a changing distribution of correctly proportioned sentence-lengths. Scarcely any block breaks off in the middle of a line and each thus forms, in spite

of linkage with the others, a kind of self-sufficient structure like a stanza, but in general no two such "stanzas" are equally long. The units also of each block tell markedly in their own individual mass and force of word and rhythm, though a concordant continuity is maintained in the sense. Enjambment, which was used to impetuous effect in *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*, is not altogether avoided, yet end-stopping is the rule as serving better the graver more contained movement demanded by the scriptural mood.

Savitri begins with a picture of darkness passing into day. This transitional hour has a particular appeal for Sri Aurobindo: several of his poems, short as well as long, are a-quiver with auroral suggestions. Among contemporary poets, we may point to Valéry as also responding very sensitively to the dawn-moment, but the glimmering obscurities of *La Jeune Parque* or the elusive lucidities of some other poems of his are "a sunrise upon ideas", as Thibaudet puts it, which, though penetrating, have little of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual evocativeness, least of all the largeness of it that is in *Savitri*.

In *Savitri* the passage of darkness into day is the last dawn in Satyavan's life, a dawn packed with the significance of the immortal light which Savitri has to win for earth by challenging the age-old decree of death. "The huge foreboding mind of Night" is first figured with a fathomless effectivity:

Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abysm of the unbodied Infinite.

But

A long lone line of hesitating hue

troubles at last the depths of the darkness in which consciousness seems sepulchred and we have poetry of an intense visionary loveliness:

A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along a fading moment's brink
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

Then the "pallid rift" widens and "the revelation and the flame"
pour out—the poetry richly reflecting them:

The brief perpetual sign recurred above.
A glamour from the unreach'd transcendences
Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,
A message from the unknown immortal Light
Ablaze upon creation's quivering edge,
Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.

Almost the epiphany appears to be disclosed, the goal of all our mortal gropings, and two lines at once simple and subtle in their sovereign spiritual suggestion afford us a glimpse of it:

Infinity's centre, a Face of rapturous calm
Parted the eternal lids that open heaven.

But

Only a little the God-light can stay

and the intensity of the wonderful Presence fades into accustomed sunshine.

In the soul of Savitri, however, the sense of her mission never disappears. Hedged in though she is by mortality, her life's movement keeps the measure of the Gods. Painting her being and its human-divine beauty Sri Aurobindo achieves some of his supreme effects. Perhaps his grandest capture of the *mantra* are the nine verses which form the centre of a long passage, variously mantric, in which Savitri's avatarhood is characterised:

As in a mystic and dynamic dance
 A priestess of immaculate ecstasies
 Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault
 Moves in some prophet cavern of the gods,
 A heart of silence in the hands of joy
 Inhabited with rich creative beats
 A body like a parable of dawn
 That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
 Or golden temple door to things beyond.

A hieratic poetry, demanding a keen sense of the occult and spiritual to compass both its subjective and objective values, is in this audacious and multi-dimensioned picture of a highly Yogic state of embodied being. Not all might respond to it and Sri Aurobindo knew that such moments in *Savitri* would have to wait long for general appreciation. But he could not be loyal to his mission without giving wide scope to the occult and spiritual and seeking to poetise them as much as possible with the vision and rhythm proper to the summits of reality. Of course, that vision and that rhythm are not restricted to the posture and contour of the summits, either the domains of divine dynamism or

The superconscient realms of motionless peace

Where judgment ceases and the word is mute
And the Unconceived lies pathless and alone

or the mid-worlds, obscure or luminous, fearsome or marvelous, of which Savitri's father, King Aswapathy, carries out a long exploration which is one of the finest and most fascinating parts of the poem. They extend to the earth-drama too and set living amongst us the mysteries and travails of cosmic evolution, like that dreadful commerce of Savitri with one whom Sri Aurobindo gives no name:

One dealt with her who meets the burdened great.
Assigner of the ordeal and the path
Who uses in this holocaust of the soul
Death, fall and sorrow for the spirit's goads,
The dubious godhead with his torch of pain
Lit up the chasm of the unfinished world
And called her to fill with her vast self the abyss.

Savitri would hardly be the unique poem that it is if it did not try to bring home to us the Unknown as it is in itself. However, it is a poem of many layers and no mean part of its excellence lies in its deploying its imponderables of sight and sound and remaining intensely spiritual even when its innumerable ranges and changes are not ostensibly concerned with spirituality. It is Legend as well as Symbol, a story with many scenes and levels of development at the same time that it is instinct with a mystical light. That light itself plays over many regions and does not fail to cover most aspects of world-thought. It is therefore not possible for it to confine itself straightforwardly to mystical substance. What it must do in order to be, despite its complex plan, a direct poetising of the Divine is to sustain everywhere the Overhead afflatus with the help princi-

pally of the sound-thrill shaking up hidden tracts of our being even while the outer attention is engaged with apparently non-mystical subjects. Thus a direct poetising of the Divine is achieved without a rejection of human interest or of the teeming motives and currents of man's mind.

A few quotations will indicate the variety of matter as well as of style, that is yet infused with the typical Aurobindonian quality. Glimpses of Nature's moods come again and again, exquisitely evocative as in

The colonnade's dream grey in the quiet eve,
The slow moonrise gliding in front of night,

or with a powerful haunting suggestion as in that transference into English of a phrase of Vyasa's:

some lone tremendous wood
Ringing for ever with the crickets' cry.

Glimpses of the human situation mix often with those of natural objects as in that simile cosmically sublime in its sweep:

As a star uncompanioned moves through heaven
Unastonished by the immensities of space,
Travelling infinity by its own light,
The great are strongest when they stand alone.

The inner strength of the great is also brought vividly home in that gesture of Savitri when, confronting Death's subtle arguments and refusing to employ the frail artifices of Reason, which are vain because always open to doubt, she chooses to match all fate with the nude dynamism of her heart and soul in a terrific line which we may term, in a phraseology popular today, super-existentialist:

I am, I love, I see, I act, I will.

Here is an expression deriving its force and resolution from deeper layers of being than the famous close in Tennyson's poem about Ulysses and his comrades:

Made weak by fate and time, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Those deeper layers render Sri Aurobindo's line more effective art also than Shelley's memorable words put into the mouth of Rousseau's ghost in his *Triumph of Life*:

Before thy memory,
I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did and died.

The insufficiency of the mere Reason as compared either to the inner soul's moved perception or to the puissant supra-intellectual sight is pictured with an inspired conceit the Elizabethans or the Metaphysicals would have welcomed with a whoop:

A million faces wears her knowledge here
And every face is turbaned with a doubt.

As unexpectedly striking and happy, though in a different key of inspiration, is the simile applied to the truth-direct ways of the higher harmonies of consciousness to which Savitri's father Aswapathy climbed:

There was no gulf between the thought and fact,
Ever they replied like bird to calling bird.

The felicity and the novelty that are prominent features of Sri Aurobindo's style in *Savitri* come at times in weirdly surprising figurations, as when Aswapathy passes through an occult infernal region:

A dragon power of reptile energies
And strange epiphanies of grovelling Force
And serpent grandeurs couching in the mire
Drew adoration to a gleam of slime.

Here the surprising has a complex character shot with imagery. It can have a complexity without being imaged, yet with the same living vibrancy. An example is the suggestion of a sacred secrecy within us:

This dark knew dumbly, immensely the Unknown.

The surprising can be in Sri Aurobindo's hands the most simple also, with but a minimum of image-glimmer. Perfect in their noble finality as in the hands of a Dante are the instances:

None can reach heaven who has not passed through hell...
All can be done if the God-touch is there...
His failure is not failure whom God leads...
Our life's repose is in the Infinite.

A certain type of effect, however, occurs often in *Savitri*, which escapes all comparison. One facet of it is that epigrammatic flash:

Earth's winged chimeras are Truth's steeds in Heaven...

This line is not only the pure Overhead style: it is also a sheer

depth of Yogic insight conveyed with concentrated richness and audacity—the unique Aurobindonian effect. Less densely shaped yet with a body as bold and brilliant is the vision developed by the Yogi's eye in the phrases:

All things hang here between God's yes and no, . . .
 The white head and black tail of the mystic drake,
 The swift and the lame foot, wing strong, wing broken
 Sustaining the body of the uncertain world,
 A great surreal dragon in the skies.

A single sentence can be made by Sri Aurobindo the Yogi to sum up the whole *Angst* of the idealist whose feeling of the supramundane is confronted not only by the world's enigmatic opposites lit up in the above lines but also by the impersonal indifference under which the Numinous appears to a certain philosophic mood:

An awful Silence watches tragic Time.

Or look at the Overhead verbal alchemisation for the state which in the language of the poetic intelligence Sri Aurobindo at one place in *Savitri* puts thus:

My mind transfigures to a rapturous seer—

and which, with the same language lifted closer to that of rapturous seerhood, he phrases elsewhere in the epic:

Splendours of insight filled the blank of thought.

In the Overhead style at a high pitch and in the unique Aurobindonian tone we have:

Our minds hush to a bright Omniscient.

And, when the spiritual profundity has been realised, the entire knowledge-process is shown, in the same style, as altered:

Idea rotated symphonies of sight,
Sight was a flame-throw from identity.

And here, in a similar manner though with a more outward turn, is the dynamic reason of the change and of the possibilities of world-divinisation, the concrete movement of the Yogic seeker undaunted by the world's doubts or denials:

I cherish God the Fire, not God the Dream.

Something of this penetrating insight, at once mystical and clear-cut, comes into play at rare moments in Iqbal, flashing up his religious and philosophical passion, as in those vehement verses Englished by A.G. Arberry where the poet exemplifies the knowledge which Sufi love gives him of the world's kinship with his being:

I have seen the movement of the sinews of the sky,
And the blood coursing in the veins of the moon.

But this is more related to the adventurously imaginative style of Francis Thompson and we feel that for all its magnificence the knowledge is not directly Yogic. A similar impression we get *vis-à-vis* Tagore's lyrical soars, high and intense though they are, as in the lines of a somewhat Overhead breath he has translated thus into English prose-poetry: "There, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day or night, nor form

nor colour, and never, never a word.” An affinity with Shelley in his less aching moments is here, an instinctive sense of the Spirit’s ether and a moved felicity of articulation. Sri Aurobindo comes also at times recognisably with turns that have been admirably practised by the Thompsons and Iqbals, the Shelleys and Tagores of man’s aspiration; but every now and then come effects of the direct Yogi, tranquilly amazing, as in

There looked out from the shadow of the Unknown
The bodiless Namelessness that saw God born
And tries to gain from the mortal’s mind and soul
A deathless body and a divine name—

or amazing with a graphic boldness, as in the disclosure suffered by “the occult Force,...guardian of the earth-scene’s Beyond”:

Her gulfs stood nude, her far transcendences
Flamed in transparencies of crowded light.

Yes, *Savitri* is full of diverse excellences woven together. And it does not reject any strand of life, it includes and absorbs every theme of import in man’s evolution towards deity. Ancient motifs and motifs of our own day are equally caught up. Even modern totalitarianism is seized in its essence in the occult figure of it that from demoniac planes behind earth precipitates amongst us the Hitlerite power and propaganda:

A bull-throat bellowed with its brazen tongue;
Its hard and shameless clamour filling space
And threatening all who dared to listen to truth
Claimed the monopoly of the battered ear;
A deafened acquiescence gave its vote,
And braggart dogmas shouted in the night

Kept for the fallen soul once deemed a god
The pride of its abysmal absolute.

Even the new physics that has replaced the classical concepts
in which “all was precise, rigid, indubitable” enters the poetry:

Once more the world was made a wonder-web,
A magic’s process in a magical space,
An unintelligible miracle’s depths
Whose source is lost in the Ineffable...
A quantum dance remained, a sprawl of chance
In Energy’s stupendous tripping whirl:...
The rare-point sparse substratum Universe
On which floats a solid world’s phenomenal face.
Alone a process of events was there
And Nature’s plastic and protean change
And, strong by death to slay or to create,
The riven invisible atom’s omnipotent force.

But here too the accent is recognisably Aurobindonian. The Overhead breath blows everywhere and in the last line we have its art at top pitch. The craftsmanship of that line is superb, with its dense humming sound dextrously mixed with other expressive vibrations, and all moving in a metre packing fourteen syllables and a predominantly anapaestic run into a scheme of five strong stresses which are helped by massed consonants in several places to beat out clearly as well as to contain the overflowing music. The four “i”’s and the four “o”’s suggest at once penetration and expansion, the latter as if from an all-round fastness. The “v” in “riven”, pronounced as it is with the upper teeth touching the lower lip, aids the sense of cutting that is in the word, while the “v” in “invisible” not only supports and increases the cutting suggestion but also hints by occurring

in that particular word and in the midst of several syllables successively short in quantity the marvellous carrying of the power of fission into the mystery of the infinitesimal that constitutes the unseen atomic nucleus. Then there are the two “m”’s with their movements of lip-closure corresponding to the closed secrecy that is being spoken of and they are preceded and followed by the labials “b” and “p” respectively which correspond to the initial motive of breaking open the closed secrecy and to the final accomplishment of that explosion. The hard strokes of the three “t”’s mingle a further nuance of breaking. The “f” of “force” picks up again the fission-power of the “v”’s and completes it with its own acute out-loosening sound accompanied by the somewhat rolled sibilance at the end. The sibilance itself, giving clear body to the softer sound of the pair of “s”’s earlier in the line, achieves the idea of a full escape of the power that was so far not sweeping out of the charmed circle, as it were, of the atom’s vibrant energy.

Indeed, the craftsmanship of the line is superb, but its success is different from what most poets might have attained, for it is due to the choice and collocation of particular words so as to create a particular rhythm embodying the vision-thrill of an Overhead consciousness. A Homer could be grandly resonant, a Milton make majestic thunder, a Shakespeare deploy a crowded colourful strength, and all be perfect poets thereby, but they could not charge their utterances, except in rare self-exceeding moments, with that vision-thrill, for the simple reason that the psychological levels on which they were accustomed to draw inspiration were specifically neither Overhead nor even orientated towards Yoga. And least of all without being a Yogi in a direct sense and having easy access to the planes above the mind would a poet, however great, be able to infuse into a verse about atomic energy or about some

other apparently non-mystical subject the very *enthousiasmos* of the *mantra*.

However, it is in the frequently mantric expression of reality's occult dimensions rather than of familiar or terrestrial objects that the major virtue of *Savitri* resides. For mainly by that expression, endowing with concrete intimacy what is usually a remote Wonder, it seizes our minds with the ideal of the spiritual Superman that we have to become through inward growth into and outward manifestation of the unexplored intensities and magnitudes of our subliminal and supraliminal being. Only, we must remember that no narrowly esoteric aim animates this poetry. The intensities and magnitudes of the Unknown that are expressed are not meant to be mysteries to which a mere handful can have the key. Although they may not be immediately comprehended by the major bulk of readers, they are voiced with a luminous faithfulness, not with a recondite or *recherché* ambiguity, and are brought into commerce with the familiar, the terrestrial. Their poet is never unaware of his mission to help by his calm

the swaying wheels of life
And the long restlessness of transient things.

No less do his pulses throb with earth's in *Savitri*, where the utmost heavens are spanned by

The lines that tear the veil from Deity's face,

than in *Urvashi* and *Love and Death* and *Baji Prabhou* with their more directly human interest and—to adapt slightly a *Savitri*-phrase to characterise them—their

Words winged with the red splendour of the heart.

Indeed, just as they touch the skies with hands of clay, *Savitri* touches the poor dust with “the high Transcendent’s sunlike hands”. Man’s earth-born heart is never forsaken by it. And perhaps the intensest throb of that heart is heard in those four long colloquies—first, the dialogue between King Aswapathy and the Divine Mother who grants him the boon he so passionately craves:

O radiant fountain of the world’s delight
World-free and unattainable above,
O Bliss who ever dwellst deep hid within
While men seek thee outside and never find,
Mystery and Muse with hieratic tongue,
Incarnate the white passion of thy force,
Mission to earth some living form of thee...
Let thy infinity in one body live,
All-Knowledge wrap one mind in seas of light,
All-Love throb single in one human heart...
Omnipotence, girdle with the power of God
Movements and moments of a mortal will,
Pack with the eternal might one human hour
And with one gesture change all future time—

then the sage Narad’s talk with King Aswapathy and his Queen-wife about the fate chosen by their daughter *Savitri* and the pain involved by it:

Pain is the hand of Nature sculpturing men
To greatness: an inspired labour chisels
With heavenly cruelty an unwilling mould.
Implacable in the passion of their will,
Lifting the hammers of titanic toil
The demiurges of the universe work;

They shape with giant strokes their own; their sons
Are marked with their enormous stamp of fire—

then the debate of the God of Death and the incarnate Love that
is Savitri, in which Savitri affirms:

Love must not cease to live upon the earth;
For Love is the bright link twixt earth and heaven,
Love is the far Transcendent's angel here;
Love is man's lien on the Absolute,

and defines against the lure of the Death-god towards escape
beyond earth into pure peace the meaning of true freedom:

Freedom is this with ever seated soul,
Large in life's limits, strong in Matter's knots,
Building great stuff of action from the worlds
To make fine wisdom from coarse scattered strands
And love and beauty out of war and night,
The wager wonderful, the game divine.
What liberty has the soul which feels not free
Unless stripped bare and cannot kiss the bonds
The Lover winds around his playmate's limbs,
Choosing his tyranny, crushed in his embrace?
To seize him better with her boundless heart
She accepts the limiting circle of his arms,
Bows full of bliss beneath his mastering hands
And laughs in his rich constraints, most bound, most free.
This is my answer to thy lures, O Death —

and lastly the passage of ecstatic words between the Godhead of
the supramental glories and Savitri the conqueror of Satyavan's
mortality facing now the test and temptation of heaven's boun-

tiful wonders and still holding out the claim of earth-life as the field of the divine Spirit:

O life, the life beneath the wheeling stars
For victory in the tournament with death,
For bending of the fierce and difficult bow,
For flashing of the splendid sword of God!
O thou who soundest the trumpet in the lists,
Part not the handle from the untried steel,
Take not the warrior with his blow unstruck.
Are there not still a million fights to wage?
O King-smith, clang on still thy toil begun,
Weld us to one in thy strong smithy of life.
Thy fine-curved jewelled hilt call Savitri,
Thy blade's exultant smile name Satyavan.

Savitri is granted her prayer by the Supreme and allowed to be the centre of His manifestation among the cosmic myriads:

O lasso of my rapture's widening noose,
Become my cord of universal love.

Thus the earth-born heart of man is shown in the poem not only in its finiteness aching for the infinite but also in an apocalyptic fulfilment. And this fulfilment, though dense with the mystical light, is again and again depicted in terms which go home to us and which set forth in a colossal clarity the Eternal in the movements of Time. For, Sri Aurobindo did not write his epic with the disposition of either a sworn Surrealist wedded to the obscurely entangled or a strict Symbolist cherishing a cult of the glimmeringly elusive. Behind the poet in him is the Master of Yoga whose work was to enlighten and not to puzzle and who, with all his roots in India's

hoary past of spirituality, was yet a modern among moderns and the seer of a new mystical progression, a collective advance in consciousness from mind to Supermind, a whole world evolving Godwards and breaking the fetters not only of political or social tyranny but also of mortal ignorance. A democracy of the Divine liberating the human was his goal, as in those words he puts into the mouth of his Savitri:

A lonely freedom cannot satisfy
A heart that has grown one with every heart:
I am a deputy of the aspiring world,
My spirit's liberty I ask for all.

SRI AUROBINDO'S LETTERS ON *SAVITRI**

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

Sri Aurobindo intended to write a long Introduction to *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol*. Together with the final revision he seems to have had in mind of a few parts of his epic, the eagerly awaited Introduction never got under way. But, as some compensation, we have a substantial number of letters by Sri Aurobindo on what can be called, if any one achievement by so vastly and variously creative a genius can lay claim to the title, his literary lifework. They have been arranged to make an introductory *ensemble*—necessarily in certain places more informal, personal, unreserved, focused on details, quick-shifting, repetitive than a specially composed piece for the public would be.

Very few, however, know how these illuminative letters came to be written. We have to go back a number of decades for their origin, and even farther for the background against which they emerged.

No sooner did I commence my contact with Sri Aurobindo in 1927 than I found the air of his Ashram humming with rich rumours of the masterpiece that had been in progress ever since his days in Baroda. Having always had a passion for poetry and having myself tried to catch a spark of the celestial fire, I was extremely thrilled, and I longed to set eyes on this most significant work of his which he was repeatedly recasting to make it accord with the ever higher ascension of his own consciousness in Yoga. But Sri Aurobindo was in no hurry to

* Written in 1951 to introduce the serialisation of the Letters in *Mother India*, then a fortnightly from Bombay instead of a monthly review from Pondicherry as at present.

show it before it reached the intensest spiritual perfection. It was I, on the contrary, who kept showing him my own little efforts at expressing the few strange glimmers of beauty and truth that at times my discipleship under so gracious a spiritual and literary guru brought me. On one such occasion, to illustrate some point, he sent back with his helpful comments two lines describing "the Ray from the transcendent penetrating through the mind's passive neutral reflection of the supreme quietude of the silent Brahman". They ran:

Piercing the limitless unknowable,
Breaking the vacancy and voiceless peace.

I was struck by the profound word-reverberations that reinforced the mystical word-suggestions with a tremendous immediacy of spiritual fact. I asked where the lines had come from. The reply was: "*Savitri*".¹

I never forgot this first brief impact of the closely guarded secret. Even before it, Sri Aurobindo had tried to make me conscious of a certain element in poetry that hailed from what he called the Overhead planes, the hidden ranges of consciousness above the intellect, with their inherent light of knowledge and their natural experience of the infinite. He distinguished four planes: Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind. The last-named has been, according to him, the top reach of the dynamic side of man's spirituality so far: a transcendental poise of immutable Brahman or featureless Nirvana is the Beyond to it usually realised when in isolated cases there is a leap to the ultimate status of that infinite silence of self-liberation which can be attained on any plane of the cosmos by an inner withdrawal. The master dynamism of the Divine, the

¹ At present these lines stand in the reverse order, on p. 354, and the word "peace" is replaced by "hush".

integral earth-transformative power which Sri Aurobindo designated Supermind or Gnosis or Truth-Consciousness and which was his own outstanding personal realisation, rendering his Yoga a unique hope for the world, has lain unmanifest and mostly unseized and, until certain radical conditions are completely fulfilled, cannot find direct expression in life or literature. Even the expression of the Overmind with its massive and comprehensive yet intensely immediate vision—especially in the entire authenticity of its undertones and overtones of rhythm—is rare, as is also to a less degree that of the Higher Mind's broad connective clarity, the Illumined Mind's many-sided opulence of colourful insight, the Intuition's swift and close and all-seizing focus. What the ancients termed the *mantra*—the stuff of Divinity itself appearing to become revelatory scriptural word as in some parts of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita—is the clearest voice of the Overmind in its few past visitations on earth. Less openly, the Overmind is the chief presence in the world's greatest poetic phrases of various types. More and more Sri Aurobindo sought—by patiently criticising, appraising, distinguishing—to help me not only respond, in my appreciation of poetry, to the rising scale of the Overhead note but also bring some strain of it into my own verses. The quest of that note grew for me a dominant occupation and most I prayed for a touch of the Overmind.

One day, emboldened by his innumerable favours of tutorship, I made a singular request. I wrote:

“I shall consider it a favour indeed if you will give me an instance in English of the inspiration of the pure Overmind. I don't mean just a line like Milton's

Those thoughts that wander through Eternity

or Wordsworth's

Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone,

which has a brief burst of it, but something sustained and plenary. I want to steep my consciousness in its rhythm and its revelation. It will be a most cherished possession. Please don't disappoint me by saying that, as no English writer has a passage of this kind, you cannot do anything for me."

He wrote back in his characteristic vein:

"Good Heavens! how am I to avoid saying that, when it is the only possible answer—at least so far as I can remember? Perhaps if I went through English poetry again with my present consciousness I might find more intimations like that line of Wordsworth, but a passage sustained and plenary? These surely are things yet to come—the 'future poetry' perhaps, but not the past."

With the familiarity—almost the impudence—he permitted us, I replied:

"I think the favour I asked was expressed in perfectly clear language. If no English poet has produced the passage I want, then who has done so in English? God alone knows. But who is capable of doing it? All of us know. Well, then why not be kind enough to grant this favour? If difficult metres could be illustrated on demand, is it impossible to illustrate in a satisfying measure something so naturally Aurobindonian as the Overmind? I am not asking for hundreds of lines—even eight will more than do—all pure gold to be treasured for ever. So please ...Perhaps it is possible only on Sunday—the day dedicated to golden *Sūrya* and rich for you with leisure from correspondence: I can wait answerless for twenty-four hours with a sweet *samatā*."

The answer came the very next morning:

"I have to say Good Heavens again. Because difficult metres can be illustrated on demand, which is a matter of metrical skill,

how does it follow that one can produce poetry from any blessed plane on demand? It would be easier to furnish you with hundreds of lines already written out of which you could select for yourself anything Overmindish if it exists (which I doubt) rather than produce 8 lines of warranted Overmind manufacture to order. All I can do is to give you from time to time some lines from *Savitri*, on condition you keep them to yourself for the present. It may be a poor substitute for the Overmental, but if you like the sample, the opening lines, I can give you more hereafter—and occasionally better.”

And then with an “e.g.” there followed in his own fine and sensitive yet forceful hand sixteen lines of the very first Canto of *Savitri* as it stood then:¹

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
 Across the path of the divine Event
 The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone
 In the unlit temple of immensity,
 Lay stretched immobile upon silence' marge,
 Mute with the unplumbed prevision of her change.
 The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.
 Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
 A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,
 The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
 Persuaded the inert back quietude
 And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
 A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
 That glowed along the moment's fading brink
 Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
 A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

¹ At present this prelude—slightly altered in phrase and with its opening and its close considerably separated—stands in a passage of 93 lines: *Savitri*, pp. 3-6.

Below the quotation were the words: "There! Promise fulfilled for a wonder."

After a whole day's absorption in the absolute nectar, I sent him a note:

"Like the sample? Rather! It is useless for me to attempt thanking you. The beauty of what you have sent may move one to utterance but the wideness takes one's breath away. I read the lines over and over again. I am somewhat stunned by the magnitude and memorableness of this day : I think your description of the divine dawn can very well apply to its spiritually poetic importance for me. Perhaps you will laugh, but I had two strange feelings before writing this letter. I was reading your verses, when I had a mute sense of big tears in the heart and a conviction that having seen what I had seen I could not possibly remain a mere mortal ! What do you say to my madness?"

The day of days was October 25, 1936. From then onwards, for months, Sri Aurobindo kept sending passages which I typed out and he touched up again or expanded. About the next passage I remarked:

"It goes reverberating in depth upon depth of one's being. What I admire is that the burden of infinite suggestion is carried with such a flexible ease. There is no attempt—as in the poetry of us lesser fry—to make things specially striking or strange or new, but a simple largeness of gesture which most naturally makes one surprising revelation after another of beauty and power."

His comment—intended, no doubt, for only my eyes, for in his public pronouncements he rarely spoke about his own work without reserve—was:

"Well, it is the difference of receiving from above and living in the ambiance of the Above—whatever comes receives the breadth of largeness which belongs to that plane."

Our correspondence went on and it continued, though with several long breaks, up to almost the end. It was a correspondence with many features. All the critical appreciation and understanding I was capable of I brought to *Savitri* and all that I could write in my own manner by way of Introduction to the poem while Sri Aurobindo was still physically among us, was put into the last chapter of my book *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*.¹ About this chapter Sri Aurobindo was both generous and modest enough to say on March 19, 1946: "It seems to me very fine both in style and substance, but as it is in high eulogy of my own writing, you must not expect me to say more." Yes, I could not help eulogising most of *Savitri* with what ever analytic and imaginative apparatus was at my disposal, yet I did not abstain from questioning a few things here and there. Nor did Sri Aurobindo either expect or desire me to abstain.

The precise character and motive of this questioning must not be misunderstood. Just as the merits of *Savitri* were appreciated to the utmost, whatever seemed a shortcoming no matter how slight and negligible in the midst of the abundant excellence was pointedly remarked upon so that Sri Aurobindo might not overlook anything in his work towards what he called "perfect perfection" before the poem came under the scrutiny of non-Aurobindonian critics at the time of publication. I was anxious that there should be no spots on *Savitri's* sun. My purpose was also to get important issues cleared up in relation to the sort of poetry Sri Aurobindo was writing and some of his disciples aspired to write. Knowing the spirit and aim of the criticisms Sri Aurobindo welcomed them, even asked for them. On many occasions he vigorously defended himself but on several he willingly agreed to introduce small changes. Once he

¹ Later (1954), when the one-volume edition of *Savitri* came out, I wrote the review which, a little altered, is included in the present collection. At the time of the earlier essay, only parts of Book One were before me.

is reported to have smiled and said to Nirodbaran apropos of my finickiness: "Is he satisfied now?"

Sri Aurobindo's grace to his uppish critic was boundless. And, although the amount of fault-finding was pretty little, I sometimes feel most ashamed and think that occasionally I encroached with the play of the surface intelligence overmuch on Sri Aurobindo's meagre and precious spare time. On the other hand, without that little amount and without my pressing upon his notice some unfavourable comments by an academic friend outside the Aurobindonian circle, the chance would have been missed for ever of seeing the finest critic I have known pass elucidatory judgment on the greatest poem I have read—a poem written by the most enlightened Master of Yoga and the most patient as well as considerate Superman one could hope to have the privilege to serve.

THE OPENING OF SAVITRI *

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON BOOK ONE CANTO ONE

I

Would you kindly help me to understand the following points in Savitri (International University Centre Edition, with the Author's Letters on the Poem, 1945) ?

P. 3. "A power of fallen boundless self..." Is it the same as "The huge foreboding mind of Night" ?

Pp. 3, 4. The above-mentioned "power" longing "to reach its end in vacant Nought", "A mute featureless semblance of the Unknown" "Repeating for ever the unconscious act...", and the Earth wheeling "abandoned in the hollow gulfs"—are these movements successive or simultaneous? The doubt has come on my reading a certain published explanation.

P. 8. "The single Call, the uncompanioned Power..." Is the Power "uncompanioned" because the Goddess of Light was alone, without the aid of Power, and now the Power is alone without the aid of Light?

P. 6. "...her luminous smile

Kindled to fire the silence of the worlds."

Does the word "fire" imply that all leapt to life or that all rose in aspiration?

Perhaps your first two points will be best clarified against the background of what seems to me the meaning in general of the difficult opening passage.

One may easily suppose that the description in this passage is of the beginning of the cosmos, the universal evolution from

* Published in *Mother India*, January and February 1969.

the Inconscient. But I believe that the description is not *directly* of any such thing, though certainly connected with it. Just as we get a clue to the dawn in the line,

This was the day when Satyavan must die,

we get a clue to the night preceding the dawn in the line:

As in a dark beginning of all things...

Attend to that "As". The night depicted is *comparable* to the beginning of the cosmos: it is not itself the starting-point of the universal evolution. It is, as a letter of Sri Aurobindo's¹ suggests, "a partial and temporary darkness". This darkness is made a "symbol", as that same letter indicates, of a state "of the soul and Nature". The symbolic character is referred to in the very passage by the line:

In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse...

One particular night, followed by one particular dawn which, like this symbolic night, is a "symbol dawn" (Canto-heading): such is the opening scene of *Savitri*'s drama. The particularity is clear when from the immense nocturnal space-scape we focus down to the wheeling Earth

Thrown back once more into unthinking dreams.

"Thrown back once more"—that is to say, forced to undergo a fresh fall like many a previous retrogression, like night after preceding night in the course of the long past.

And a similar turn in another letter by Sri Aurobindo² directs us to the particularity as well as to the symbolisation.

¹ P. 829. ² P. 907.

Saying that the description is not “simply of physical night and physical dawn” but that either of them is “what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised”, Sri Aurobindo goes on to declare of the inner reality behind the night-symbol: “here it is a relapse into Inconscience...” The word “relapse”, like the phrase “Thrown back once more”, is an indisputable index of a new setback, involving here an unconscious state, as happens every night in the twenty-four-hour cycle through which we repeatedly pass.

In the poem itself our interpretation is supported when “a nameless movement, an unthought Idea” stirred the Inconscience and it was as though even in “dissolution’s core” there lurked a surviving entity

Condemned to resume the effort and the pang,
Reviving in another frustrate world.¹

“Resume”, “reviving”, “another”—all these are signposts to a particular night about to end, a period of darkness with a before and an after of the same kind. A before and an after are implied also when, a little later, a “hesitating hue” on the eastern horizon, like a scout from the sun,

...conquering Nature’s disillusioned breast
Compelled renewed consent to see and feel.²

A disillusioning day preceding the night, a forced renewal of hope in the succeeding dawn, as in a past sequence again and again, are suggested.

It may be argued: “Though a cycle of darkness and light is there, precluding a direct account of a straight once-for-all

¹ P. 4. ² P. 5.

evolution from a cosmic Inconscience, the cycle is not diurnal but aeonic. The Indian cosmogonic theory speaks of a repeated emergence of the universe from the Unmanifest and a repeated disappearance into it: there comes a *pralaya*, a dissolution, after which once more a manifesting process starts. Sri Aurobindo shows us a new cosmic relapse into Inconscience and a new cosmic emergence: the effort and the pang of evolution are resumed, a revival in another frustrate world occurs, an old disillusioning cosmic history is forgotten and a compulsion is felt to renew consent to grow conscious. An aeonic vision, directly expressed, of destruction and creation on a cosmic scale is before us in *Savitri*'s opening account."

We should reply: "The Indian cosmogonic theory of *pralaya* does not envisage a relapse into Inconscience. The universe is withdrawn into a Superconscience of the Unmanifest and then reprojected. In *Savitri* we have no such passage into Superconscience, no return of the cosmos into the First Cause, the Divine. An Inconscience, symbolised by Night, is all that is there. We may, of course, think of a recurrent relapse into a primeval Inconscience, from which a new cosmic history takes its start time and again. But we cannot bring such a relapse into tune with the Indian cosmogonic theory. What is more important, we do not even come across this kind of relapse in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. When Sri Aurobindo says that 'from a dark immense Inconscient this material world arises and out of it a soul that by evolution is struggling into consciousness',¹ he conceives the process to be not repetitive at all but absolutely unique. For, considering the Why of it, 'the origin of this phenomenon', which 'stands as it were automatically justified in a supra-intellectual knowledge,' he observes: 'To the human mind one might answer that while in itself the Infinite might be free from those perturbations [*i.e.*, division, disharmony, pain, evil],

¹ *The Riddle of This World* (1933), p. 99.

yet once manifestation began infinite possibility also began and among the infinite possibilities which it is the function of the universal manifestation to work out, the negation, the apparent effective negation—with all its consequences—of the Power, Light, Peace, Bliss was very evidently one. If it is asked why even if possible it should have been accepted, the answer nearest to the Cosmic Truth which the human intelligence can make is that in the relations or in the transition of the Divine in the Oneness to the Divine in the Many, this ominous possible became at a certain point an inevitable...’ Sri Aurobindo unequivocally affirms that to work out a Divine Emergence from the very opposite of the Divine was just ‘one’ possibility out of an infinite number. The remaining possibilities were all different from this. There can be no question of a cyclic evolution on a cosmic scale from a stark Inconscience in a struggling pain-fraught gradual manner through the ages. *Savitri*’s opening account, if it directly expressed an aeonic vision of this sort of universal destruction and creation, would be absolutely non-Aurobindonian.”

Yes, we have to stop with a cycle which is not aeonic but diurnal. However, in the new night that has come—the last in the married life of Satyavan and Savitri—the poet reads not only a state of the subjective being that is temporarily caught in the darkness which it feels as if that darkness were universal and eternal. The poet reads also in the new night a picture of what happened once-for-all at the commencement of cosmic history. The pointers to that history are scattered all over. I have already mentioned one: “As in a dark beginning of all things.” Here is another immediately after it:

A mute featureless semblance of the Unknown...

A third goes with an earlier line already cited:

Almost one felt opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abysm of the unbodied Infinite...

So the night-symbol may be considered a double one. It is suggestive or representative not only of a temporary relapse into Inconscience but also of a fundamental fall which constitutes the God-oblivious state on a cosmic scale. From this fall, as from a bodiless infinite abyss, a slow difficult return has to start of a God-memory ultimately leading to a God-realisation in terms of an embodied existence within the very cosmos where the emergence, the evolution, takes place. The depiction of that fundamental fall is the central theme of the poem's overture, even though the direct depiction is only of a particular period of darkness lasting a short time. For, the "symbol dawn" unfolds the panorama of a gradual rousing of consciousness on its way to the archetypal Superconscience and then the advent of this Superconscience itself in a passing spell of spiritual light—pre-sage of Earth one day receiving and embodying the Divine in a supreme transfiguration of Mind and Life-force and Matter through the Soul's full awakening to the Supramental Reality that has to emerge and evolve here. The work that Savitri will do, bringing Satyavan back from the clutch of Death, of Yama who is the godhead of Inconscience, and making possible to earth the immortality of the superconscient Gods of Light, is prophesied by this dawn of the very day on which Satyavan must die. And the prophecy is touched alive through the picture of the original Inconscience and its evolutionary history.

However, the setting remains one particular night. And a skilful blending of the particular and the general—this night and the primal Night—is in the passage where the "semblance" of the original Inconscience is mentioned. We have there a switch-over from the continued past tense everywhere to a

sudden present tense: the particular night, which happened at one time, “cradled”, as such nights had done repeatedly before,

the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force
Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns
And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl.

“Kindles” and “carries” are in the present tense, proving themselves to be generalities. They, as a letter¹ puts it, “bring in a general idea stressing the paradoxical nature of the creation and the contrasts which it contains; the drowsed somnambulist as the mother of the light of the suns and the activities of life”. What is packed into the lines where the two verbs occur “is not intended as a present feature in the darkness of the Night”. In other words, there is no transition from a void Inconscience to a creative movement in the Night with which the poem opens. The “suns” and “our lives” are already there, and only the cradling goes on as ever of an ignorant Force’s cosmic drowse. The creative slumber-movement belongs to the original Inconscience—it comes in here as but a truth for all time and not as a fact of the one special time whose tale Sri Aurobindo is recounting.

A truth for all time of another sort, blended with the fact of one special time, we get also in the very first line of the poem:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

The contrast of the past tense “was” with the present tense “awake” strikes, at the poem’s sheer opening, the note of one particular night to which applied a truth valid for night after night as the darkness draws to its close—namely, the commencement of the cosmic functions of light, the constructive work-

¹ Pp. 847.

ings of the Nature-Gods. Doubtless, the past tense “awoke” also could go with one particular night, but the particularity would not then be self-evident. The present tense leaves no alternative to the particularity. On the other hand, if the original Inconscience were meant by the Night, we should have exclusively the phrase: “before the Gods awoke.” The past tense would show the once-for-all primal awakening, the once-for-all initial unfolding or evolving of consciousness-light. The present tense would be impossible, indicating as it does what would happen periodically at every dawning at the end of each night like the one which preceded the day of Satyavan’s death.

Now we can come to your first two points. The various expressions employed—“The huge foreboding mind of night”, “A power of fallen boundless self”, “A mute featureless semblance of the Unknown”—are all about the same thing. And the whole description shows different aspects of it. The aspects are shown successively but they do not constitute a series of successive happenings. Up to the line—

The impassive skies were neutral, empty, still¹

we have a multitude of glimpses, on a particular occasion, of “the hour before the Gods awake”, covering “the vain enormous trance of Space” and, within “the hollow gulfs” of Space, the small Earth spinning like a shadow in forgetful sleep. The entranced Space holds the once-kindled and still-burning suns: the Earth goes on carrying our lives, the innumerable generations from age to age.

As for

The single Call, the uncompanioned Power,

the sense of the adjectives emerges when we read a little

¹ P. 4.

analytically the rest of the passage as well as the line preceding that opening verse:

The message ceased and waned the messenger.
The single Call, the uncompanioned Power,
Drew back into some far-off secret world
The hue and marvel of the supernal beam...

What has come into the mortal's ken for a short while is not the whole of "some far-off secret world" but just a significant suggestion from it, a message embodied in a messenger who brings "the supernal beam" but not the entire mass of luminosity lying behind it—the Sun of Truth that has projected a herald of its light in the form of the Dawn-Goddess. It is because the full glory is held back unmanifested that the Call kindled in our space and time is "single" and the Power looking out on our mortality is "uncompanioned". This phenomenon is expressed or rather indicated also in the lines:

A lonely splendour from the invisible goal
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane...
A Form from far beatitudes seemed to near.
Ambadress twixt eternity and change,...
Once she half-looked behind for her veiled sun...¹

The "splendour" is "lonely" because the "sun" is still "veiled". The plenary Perfection remaining hidden in its "far beatitudes" and sending forth a flame-part to work by itself in the phenomenal universe is pictured also in the passage:

A glamour from the unreached transcendences

¹ Pp. 6-7.

Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,
A message from the unknown immortal Light...¹

And later we read:

Here too the vision and prophetic gleam
Lit into miracles common meaningless shapes...²

The “prophetic gleam” rather than the fulfilled Sunhood is here: hence the solitariness of the Call and the Power. The solitariness has nothing to do with any distinction between the Power and the Goddess of Light and their being “uncompagnioned” by each other.

The last quotation carries us naturally to your final question apropos of the phrase:

...her luminous smile
Kindled to fire the silence of the worlds.

The significance is not quite the same but there are keen affinities. In the latter phrase the terms contraposed are “fire” and “silence”: in the former they are “miracles” and “common meaningless shapes”. But the instrument at work is in both cases the divine light and, when we take into consideration the words preceding those cited by you and connect the “luminous smile” with its being “scattered on sealed depths”, we find that what results in either instance is a revelation. In one the revelation is of divine forms in shapes without distinction and meaningful content—“miracles” that express in a lustrous language the soul-sense lying concealed in dense earthly things. In the other the revelation is again of what lay sealed in silence in the recesses of our manifold world—something

¹ P. 6. ² P. 7.

beatifically bright that shows itself under the impact of the Dawn-Goddess's "luminous smile" in a response of self-expression which Sri Aurobindo sums up as "fire". You ask whether the meaning is: "all leapt to life" or "all rose in aspiration". Both the senses are legitimate, but the immediate direct sense is offered in the very next line:

All grew a consecration and a rite.

Ordinary phenomena—air, wind, hills, boughs—became fierily activised, splendorously vitalised, into states and gestures of soul-elevating worship.

Actually, your quotation and my quotation are parts of one whole, two concordant as well as complementary aspects of a single brief epiphany. Yours refers to the domain of Nature on its more ethereal side, so to speak; mine bears upon this domain on its more terrestrial side, the side which is "our half-lit ignorance", man's "ambiguous earth", "this anguished and precarious field of toil".¹ The high "wideness"² responds in yours; "our prostrate soil"³ answers in mine—the transfiguring touch on both is the same "awakening ray".⁴

2

There is a new point arising out of your explanatory note. You have taken the Dawn and the "Ambadress twixt eternity and change" to be the same. I thought they were different. The Deity, that comes after the Dawn departs burying her aura's "seed of grandeur in the hours", is called the Goddess of eternal Light by Sri Aurobindo in a letter to you. The Dawn is always brief; it is followed by LIGHT continuous. That is how I understood. Would you again help?

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid. ³ Ibid. ⁴ Ibid.

No doubt, the Dawn is brief, but can it, for that reason, be debarred from being the Goddess of eternal Light? The function of the Spiritual Dawn, like the operation of the physical dawn, is to come as a herald and then disappear. But merely because Usha—to use the Rigvedic name and figure—appears for a short duration to do her work, is she herself a short-lived entity? She is surely an emanation or manifestation of eternal Light. Eternal Light briefly revealing itself does not cease to be eternal. In a general way not only Dawn but all experiences of spiritual luminosity last a short time under the conditions of the present natural and mortal life in the cosmos. Does not Sri Aurobindo state this truth when he writes:

Only a little the God-light can stay¹?

Can we affirm that by staying only a little the God-light is disqualified from being in itself eternal or, as you put it, continuous?

To come directly to your own terms of opposition: the Dawn and the Ambadress. You say the Dawn departs after burying her aura's seed of grandeur in the hours. I believe you do so on the strength of the lines:

An instant's visitor the godhead shone:
On life's thin borders awhile the Vision stood...²

A slightly earlier support for you may be the verse in the same context:

The brief perpetual sign recurred above.³

Your very word "brief" is here. But it is coupled with what

¹ P. 8. ² P. 6. ³ *Ibid.*

seems its contradiction: "perpetual". Of course, we can say that the sign is perpetual in that it is recurrent, it is brief again and again: the recurring brevity is its sole perpetualness. Quite true, but let us see what the Vision did as it stood awhile, an instant's visitor:

Interpreting a recondite beauty and bliss
In colour's hieroglyphs of mystic sense,
It wrote the lines of a significant myth
Telling of a greatness of spiritual dawns...¹

With the old Vedic word "greatness" (*mahimā*) ringing in my ears, I suspect that in "perpetual" there is also a subtle shade of "eternal", a suggestion of something from the Everlasting: the brief sign is itself eternity packed in a moment. This is but natural when that Dawn is called

A message from the unknown immortal Light.²

And, after all, what is it that shone as an instant's visitor? The reply from the poem itself is: "the godhead." Are we to think that this godhead is not of eternal Light? In the line just quoted, "immortal Light" is declared to have sent the Dawn as its "message". The message may have lasted for a brief duration, yet it must have been made of the stuff of immortality if it came from the Light that is immortal.

Further, even supposing the Dawn to have been essentially non-continuous and to have departed, does the Ambadress whom you identify as the Goddess of eternal Light fare really any better? First we may observe that, like the Dawn, she is also called a "vision" as well as a mere fore-glimpse:

Here too the vision and prophetic gleam...³

¹ *Ibid.* ² *Ibid.* ³ P. 7.

Next we may realise that the general truth couched in the verse already quoted—

Only a little the God-light can stay—

is uttered in the context of none else than your Goddess of eternal Light. And it is about her we read:

Then the divine afflatus, spent, withdrew,
Unwanted, fading from the mortal's range.¹

The Ambadress's life is hardly Methuselahite: very soon it is "spent" and starts "fading". This sad truth is confirmed by other verses:

That transitory glow of magic fire
So now dissolved in bright accustomed air.
The message ceased and waned the messenger...
Her body of glory was expunged from heaven:
The rarity and wonder lived no more.²

The light of the Ambadress is termed "that transitory glow" and is said to dissolve, cease, wane and get expunged, yet all this does not prevent it from being not only "magic fire", "body of glory", "rarity and wonder" but also—as some previous lines imply—"spiritual beauty" which "squanders eternity on a beat of Time".³

The Ambadress and the Dawn are essentially in the same case: the "brief" is the "eternal" as well, and the "eternal" is the "brief" too. The pair are, as a colloquialism would put it, much of a muchness. A ground is thus initially created for identifying them. And this ground is seen to be veritable *terra*

¹ *Ibid.* ² P.8. ³ *Ibid.*

firma as soon as we ask: "What phase of time, after the Night, is represented by the Ambadress?" If she is different from the Dawn, what is she? Sunrise is the only phenomenon succeeding the Dawn. Is the Ambadress the Day itself? That is impossible since precisely of her Sri Aurobindo writes:

Once she half looked behind for her veiled sun...¹

She "went to her immortal work" before the sun was unveiled: she thus cannot be any part of the Day. And, if she cannot, she has to be nothing save the Dawn.

The fact is: the Dawn, however brief, has several phases or "transitions". Commenting on a certain passage Sri Aurobindo² indicates some of them coming on the heels of the darkness: "There is first a black quietude, then the persistent touch, then the first 'beauty and wonder' leading to the magical gate and the 'lucent corner'. Then comes the failing of the darkness, the simile used ('a falling cloak') suggesting the rapidity of the change. Then as a result the change of what was once a rift into a wide luminous gap....Then all changes into a 'brief perpetual sign', the iridescence, then the blaze and the magnificent aura." The next phase is

A brilliant code penned with the sky for page³

and the statement is made:

Almost that day the epiphany was disclosed...
A lonely splendour from the invisible goal
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane.⁴

The epiphanic phase leads on to a greater nearness or brightness

¹ P. 7. ² P. 828-9. ³ P. 6. ⁴ *Ibid.*

of the Dawn-Goddess. Her very tread is heard and her Face opens heaven and her Form brings beatitude close. She is now called "the omniscient Goddess" and she soon

Kindled to fire the silence of the worlds¹

and

Lit into miracles common meaningless shapes²

and completed her symbolic job:

The prescience of a marvellous birth to come.³

But the divinity, the earth-transforming supernal Power, which she images forth through the process of time, is unwanted by the mortal's world and so she fades away into "the common light of earthly day".

A gloss of particular pertinence, that emerges from Sri Aurobindo's catalogue of phases, is: the line on the "brief perpetual sign" is not an all-covering one for the Dawn's nature, it is just a single phase among many—a phase succeeded by the "iridescence" and then the "blaze" and the "magnificent aura". What is intended by the line is, as it were, an announcement—very short in its duration though everlasting in its process and purpose—of the multi-coloured glamour and the wide burning message. Neither of the two epithets—"brief perpetual"—are directly meant to characterise the whole Dawn any more than the substantive "sign" is meant to do so. To make the whole Dawn brief, one would have to fall back only upon the words "instant" and "awhile" coming a little later.

However, you will notice that, although the Dawn is desig-

¹ P. 7. ² *Ibid.* ³ P. 8.

nated “an instant’s visitor” who is also a “Vision” that stood “awhile”, she is nowhere explicitly said to fade or dissolve. On the contrary, she goes on doing things: bending over earth’s forehead curve, interpreting hidden beauty and unfamiliar bliss, writing the lines of a myth, penning a brilliant code on the sky-page. Where do you find that the Dawn “departs”? To bury her aura’s seed of grandeur in the hours is surely not tantamount to the Dawn herself getting buried! The Dawn merely impregnates with a spark of the Divine the world of time and space and she does this not by herself disappearing but by building her aura of magnificent hues. The disappearance of the light preceding the sunrise—the fading of the Dawn, that is to say—comes only when the

Ambassadress twixt eternity and change¹

has carried out certain revelatory functions. Hence the Ambassadress cannot be other than the Dawn herself in her most developed and final God-goldenness.

To “cap, crown and clinch” all that I have said I shall turn to Sri Aurobindo’s letter, to which you have referred. He does mention “the Goddess of eternal Light” but there is no distinction made between her and the Dawn-Goddess. In fact, the clear implication is just the opposite. Here is the text:² “that passage in my symbolic vision of Night and Dawn in which there is recorded the conscious adoration of Nature when it feels the passage of the omniscient Goddess of eternal Light.” The Goddess in question is here said to figure in Sri Aurobindo’s “symbolic vision of Night and Dawn”. There is no going beyond the Dawn. Whatever follows the Night in the vision falls within the Dawn-category. Again, in the same letter, when he is discussing “the conscious adoration of Nature” which is

¹ P. 7. ² P. 901.

connected with the Goddess of eternal Light, he¹ remarks apropos of the line—

The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky²:

“This last line is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry not only in the dawn but at other times....” The phrase—“not only in the dawn”—means in the first place that the phenomenon of “all grew a consecration and a rite”³ as a result of the Goddess’s “luminous smile” can happen in the dawn. It means in the second place that, although in the poem it happens in the dawn, it can happen also in other phases of our twenty-four-hour cycle. So, as far as the poem is concerned, there is no going beyond Usha to some “Deity” coming after her. At a later place in the same letter we get one more indication of what I have been trying to demonstrate. Sri Aurobindo⁴ writes in reply to a certain aspect of the criticism my friend M made: “His objection of *longueur* would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the ‘day’ of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out.” Mark that Sri Aurobindo talks only of night and dawn and refers to the former as “a relapse into Inconscience” and to the latter in terms that combine adjectives and nouns such as

¹ P. 904. ² P. 7. ³ *Ibid.* ⁴ P. 907.

the Canto uses at both the beginning and the end of the account of the growing spiritual luminousness magically preceding the common daylight. “Brief” and “splendid” remind us of your “Dawn”: “prophetic outbreak of spiritual light” recalls your “Goddess of eternal Light”. The whole inevitable impression left is that your two entities are one, in a varied progression of self-disclosure.

Of course, as we find from Sri Aurobindo’s list of “transitions” or phases, the epithet “brief” occurring in the beginning of the account has a bearing different from the same epithet in the above sentence. The former applied merely to a particular step in the progression, the latter serves to give a characteristic of the whole movement. But my point is that what you define as “brief”—namely, the phenomenon prior to the Ambassador’s arrival—gets equated here, by the employment of the same defining term, with what includes this arrival no less than that phenomenon. Sri Aurobindo has put both parts of the account together as the story of a single divine manifestation through a series of Nature-moments, both that phenomenon and this arrival being called “outbreak of spiritual light”.

The continuing identity of a single process, the developing disclosure of no more than one divine entity, Usha the spiritual Dawn, can be yet again established from another observation of Sri Aurobindo’s in the very letter we are drawing upon. He is discoursing on my friend’s objection to repetition of the cognates “sombre Vast”, “unsounded Void”, “opaque Inane”, “vacant Vasts”, especially as they fall into the same place at the end of the line. Sri Aurobindo¹ writes: “What was important for me was to keep constantly before the view of the reader...the ever-present sense of the Inconscience in which everything is occurring. It is the frame as well as the background without which all the details would either fall apart or stand out only as

¹ P. 908.

separate incidents. That necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn and then it disappears; each phrase gives a feature of this Inconscience proper to its place and context. It is the entrance of the 'lonely splendour' into an otherwise inconscient obstructing and unreceptive world that has to be brought out and that cannot be done without the image of the 'opaque Inane' of the Inconscience which is the scene and cause of the resistance. There is the same necessity for reminding the reader that the 'tread' of the Divine Mother was an intrusion on the vacancy of the Inconscience and the herald of deliverance from it."

I have cited Sri Aurobindo's observation in full in order precisely to bring out the apparent opposition of the "lonely splendour" (which you attribute to the Dawn) and the "Divine Mother" (whom you would identify with a Deity coming after the Dawn and acting as the "Ambadress")—yes, to bring out this "opposition" and then show the complete reconciliation. I want to prove that the Divine Mother is herself the Dawn and that the "opposition" is just the succession of different aspects of the Dawn who is the Divine Mother. Take the verse about the Divine Mother's advent:

Once more a tread perturbed the vacant Vasts...¹

Now, "vacant Vasts" is set by Sri Aurobindo along with "sombre Vast", "unsounded Void" and "opaque Inane" as one of the cognate expressions whose "necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn". It is the Dawn and nothing else but the Dawn that is continuing all through and the tread of the Divine Mother is a portion of the process before the Dawn's full outburst: it is a phase of the Dawn-Goddess's gradual unfoldment of her "eternal Light".

¹ P. 7.

I am afraid I have over-laboured my thesis. I have done so because I felt you wanted the answer to your new point to be completely convincing to your understanding. An all-round treatment seemed desirable. And perhaps the final touch to the needed all-roundness will be given if in conclusion I hark back to the Rigveda for some descriptions of the Dawn as being no other than the Goddess of eternal Light and as doing what Sri Aurobindo's Ambadress does—the Rigveda whose imagery so often gleams out in *Savitri*.

Usha is described in I, 113.19, *mātā devānām aditer anīkam*, "Mother of the gods, form (or power) of Aditi." A Rik (80.1) of the fifth Mandala presents Usha as "a form from far beatitudes" coming near: it describes her as *dṛtad-yāmānam bṛihatim ṛitena ṛitāverim svar āvahantīm*, "of a luminous movement, vast with the Truth, supreme in (or possessed of) the Truth, bringing with her Swar." The same role is played in VII, 81.3: *yā vahasi puru sparham na dāsuṣe mayah*, "thou who bearest to the giver the beatitude as a manifold and desirable ecstasy." Then we have an analogue of the "face of rapturous calm" parting "the eternal lids that open heaven,"¹ in VII, 75, 1: *vyuṣā āvo divijā ṛitena, āviṣkṛiṇvānā mahimānam āgāt*, "Dawn born in heaven opens out things by the Truth, she comes manifesting the greatness." *Savitri*'s "omniscient Goddess" kindling the silent worlds to fire is the Rigveda's "young and ancient goddess of many thoughts, shining out on us immortal,... uttering the words of Truth", she who fronting "the worlds of the becoming stands aloft over them all as the vision of Immortality" (III, 61-3).

¹ *Ibid.*

POETRY IN SRI AUROBINDO'S VISION *

LIGHTS FROM PASSAGES IN *SAVITRI*

We have said a good deal about Sri Aurobindo the Poet. And we have looked upon *Savitri* as the peak—or rather the many-peaked Himalaya—of Aurobindonian poetry. Also, in dealing with the supreme altitudes as well as the inferior heights we have given glimpses of the Poet's view of the poetic phenomenon both in its essence and in its progression. It may not be amiss to dwell at a little more length on some of the fundamentals involved.

The easiest way to do so would be to string together or else paraphrase a number of passages from Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism. But I should think a mode more relevant to a series of discourses on the Poet Sri Aurobindo would be to pick out lines from his greatest poem—*Savitri*—and lay bare with their help his view on being a poet and, wherever necessary, use the literary criticism for confirmation. Academics may frown but the poetry-reader is likely to appreciate the novelty of the treatment.

We may launch on our venture with a verse from Book V, Canto 2, where Sri Aurobindo narrates the early life of Satyavan. Satyavan is called

A wanderer communing with marge and depth.¹

This semi-Wordsworthian turn is a suggestive summary of the poet's mood in its basic orientation. The poet moves among a

* Adapted from Nos. 2,3, and 4 of *Talks on Poetry* delivered to students of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education and published in *Mother India* but not yet collected in book-form.

¹ P. 446.

diversity of things but everywhere he gets into living touch with what seems to overpass the limits of life, he is in his mood always at the edge of things, communing with their ultimate aspects and looking over the edge to commune with the beyond and to experience profundities in all with which he establishes a contact of consciousness. And we may include, in “communing”, the poet’s relationship with marge and depth in his reader’s being by means of revealing words that draw a response from it. Communion would thus cover communication.

Yes, this line is a good hint of the poetic process. But it is not specifically what I wish to put forth. The verses I want to quote are two groups, each consisting of six lines—and, incidentally though far from superfluously, four passages relevant to one group. The sextet with which the passages are linked is a straight run, the other’s components do not occur immediately in sequence but are made an *ensemble* by me. I shall take up first the second group and try to elicit from it a many-shaded picture of poetic psychology and metaphysics according to Sri Aurobindo.

The *ensemble* is from Book V, Canto 3. As in the line about the “wanderer”, Sri Aurobindo is not exclusively describing here the poetic mood and process. I am adapting to my own purpose some phrases of his that can be taken to describe them because they are portions of a context where the inward development of Satyavan is described in connection with his experience and exploration of Nature, a development on a broad scale that does issue also in art-activity on Satyavan’s part. Here are the lines:

As if to a deeper country of the soul
 Transposing the vivid imagery of earth,
 Through an inner seeing and sense a waking came...
 I caught for some eternal eye the sudden

Kingfisher flashing to a darkling pool,...
And metred the rhythm-beats of infinity.¹

In the first three lines we have the indication of a new awareness which is not on the surface but in the recesses of our being, the recesses that are called "soul". On a hasty reading, we may be inclined to think that the word "soul" is here employed in a general way for our self and that several countries are ascribed to it, some shallow and some deep, and that the reference is not so much to the soul in a special connotation as to "a deeper country". Such an interpretation would be a mistake. The soul is not here a generalisation, it is acutely contrasted to "earth": the two turns—"of the soul" and "of the earth"—are balanced against each other: there are only two countries implied, the country of earth and the country of the soul, the former a surface region, the latter a "deeper" domain. And by "earth" with its "vivid imagery" is meant the contents of our normal waking consciousness packed with thousands of observations, whereas the "soul" stands for a consciousness other than the life-force and mind operating in conjunction with a material body and brain. This consciousness is ordinarily like a dream-region, but the poet undergoes a novel "wakening" there by which he reinterprets in a different and deeper light the earth-experience. Nor is that all. His reinterpretation involves the experience of new things in the soul's depths, things which are *as if* earthly objects "transposed" into them but which in reality exist in their own right, native to those depths and constituting the originals whose copies or representatives are earthly objects. The specific quality of the experience of these originals is to be gauged from the use of the word "soul" and no other. Poetry is primarily not the exclamation of the mind and its concepts, not the cry of the life-force and its desires, not the appeal of the

¹ Pp. 458-9.

body and its instincts. All of them are audible in it, but in tune with a central note beyond them which—as Longinus recognised centuries ago—strangely transports us, a note charged with some ecstatic ideality, a magical intimacy, a mysterious presence, which we can specify only as the Divine.

When we say this we should not lay ourselves open to the objection: “All fine poets do not offer us spiritual matter. They talk of a multitude of earthly things and some of them are even disbelievers. The Roman Lucretius scoffed at religion and said that the gods were created by human fear: he was a materialist and atheist by intellectual persuasion.” It is true that a lot of excellent poetry is ostensibly unconcerned with any divine reality. But need that prove it non-spiritual whether in its origin or in its process? Its spirituality lies basically in the exercise in it of a rare power which goes beyond the human consciousness’s well-established modes of functioning and which we may designate, for want of a proper term, “intuition”, an intensity of immediate response penetrating the “within” of all appearances by a lightning-like enraptured plumbing of one’s own “within”. Poetry is spiritual, in the first place, by the intuitive manner in which any theme is diversely treated by the imagination, the intuitive fashion in which the heart variously thrills to any theme. In the second place, poetry is spiritual by the expressive results brought about by the intuitive activity. The imagination’s treatment is reflected in a word-gesture, the heart’s thrill is echoed in a word-movement, that carry a certain absoluteness about them. There is an inevitable phrase-pattern, there is an unimpeachable rhythm-design—in short, a form of perfect beauty inwardly created, not built up by mere outward skill. Through such form, poetry, whatever its subject, comes with the face and gait of a godhead. How even materialism and atheism could come like this is well hit off by a paradoxical turn of

Elizabeth Browning's about Lucretius: she writes in a poem that he "denied divinely the Divine".

It is the intrinsic divineness of the intuition-packed creative style of poetry that is the soul's note in it. And it is because the soul finds tongue through the poet that we have a light in poetry, a delight in poetry. Light and delight are the soul's very stuff, we might say, and by virtue of them the soul's "inner seeing and sense" is not just a fanciful entertainment but a kind of revelation. Of course, it is not directly a spiritual, a mystic gesture and movement: it is only indirectly so and even when its subject is spiritual or mystic the poet does not necessarily become a Yogi or a Rishi. In most instances he is no more than an "inspired" medium. But the soul-quality ensures, as Sri Aurobindo puts it in *The Future Poetry*,¹ that the genuine poetic utterance is not merely a pastime, not even a godlike one: "it is a great formative and illuminative power."

The psychological instrument of this power is defined by the phrase: "inner seeing and sense." Here the stress is not only on the inwardness: it is also on sight. The poet is fundamentally occupied with the activity of the eye. When he turns to the phenomena of earth, what he busies himself with is their "vivid imagery". An image is something visual. A keen experience of shapes and colours is the poet's speciality and it is this that is connoted by the words: "seeing and sense." "Sense" is a term suggesting at once perception and feeling and understanding, a contact of consciousness with an object; but the main channel of the contact here is the sight. The perceiving, feeling, understanding consciousness of the poet comes to an active point, an effective focus, through the function of seeing: his the concentration and merging of all sense in vision. "Vision," says Sri Aurobindo in

¹ P. 14.

The Future Poetry,¹ “is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist.” A very acute and felicitous statement, this. Note first the noun “power” in connection with the poet. It recalls to us De Quincey’s division of literature into the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. Philosophy and science are the literature of knowledge while all prose and poetry that are pieces of art fall under the category of literature of power because they affect the emotions and change attitudes and remould character. Note next the adjective “essential” in relation to the philosopher’s gift. Philosophy is supposed to make clear the basic principle of reality, the essence of things. Then note the epithet “natural” apropos of the scientist’s work. The scientist cuts into the physical universe and reaches down to its system of laws—his field is what commonly passes as Nature. A born master of words has made the statement, instinctively using the most expressive turns. But we are not at the moment concerned so much with the art of the statement as with its isolation of the poet’s function from the functions of the philosopher and the scientist: this function is primarily neither to think out reality nor to dissect phenomena but to experience the play of light and shadow, fixity and flux, individual form and multiple pattern: the poet may have a philosophic or a scientific bent (Lucretius had both), but he must exercise it in a glory of sight, set forth everything with intimate image, evocative symbol or at least general suggestive figurativeness.

To make a broad résumé in Sri Aurobindo’s words:² “the native power of poetry is in its sight” and “the poetic vision of life is not a critical or intellectual or philosophic view of it, but a soul-view, a seizing by the inner sense”, and the poetic climax is, in its substance and form, “the rhythmic revelation or intuition

¹ P. 39 ² P. 46.

arising out of the soul's sight..."

The ancient Indian word for poet is *Kavi*, which means one who sees and discloses. Of course the disclosing, the making manifest, the showing out is an integral part of the poet's function, and it is this part that is stressed in the Latin term *poeta* from the Greek *poetes*, which stands for "maker", "fashioner", "creator". But the whole labour of formation lies in rendering visible, in leading us to see, what has been seen by the one who forms. The vision is the first factor, the embodiment and communication of it is the second. The Indian name goes to the root of the matter in speaking of the seer who discloses instead of the discloser who has seen. Shakespeare bears out the Indian characterisation, though he does not neglect the Greek and Latin, by the famous passage which describes what the poet does. In picturing the poet's activity he speaks of "the poet's eye"—

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothings
A local habitation and a name.

Yes, the poet is primarily a seer, but we may remember that he does not stop with mere sight of the surface of reality: his is not sight so much as in-sight: he sees through, behind, within: his fundamental glancing is, as Shakespeare puts it, "from heaven to earth" and, only after that, it is "from earth to heaven." The poet's "fine frenzy" transports his eye to some paradisaical Yonder before bringing it into touch with the terrestrial Here. Even when the latter is touched, there is no resting there: the former is once again reached, the reader is carried finally where the writer started from. And the forms which the poet bodies

forth are of things unknown, there is always something unfathomable about his vision—a distance beyond distance, a depth beyond depth: this constitutes the transcendence of the intellectual meaning by poetry.

Ultimately the transcendence derives from the Supreme Spirit, the Poet Creator whose words are worlds. The human poet's vision has a contact, remote or close, with "some eternal eye", as the phrase runs in the fourth line of our quotation. Sri Aurobindo has written in *The Future Poetry*:¹ "The intellectual, vital, sensible truths are subordinate things; the breath of poetry should give us along with them or it may be apart from them, some more essential truth of the being of things, their very power which springs in the last resort from something eternal in their heart and secrecy, *hṛidaye guhāyām*, expressive even in the moments and transiencies of life." Mark the words: "something eternal." In another place in *The Future Poetry*² we read that the poet may start from anything: "he may start from the colour of a rose, or the power or beauty of a character, or the splendour of an action, or go away from all these into his own secret soul and its most hidden movements. The one thing needful is that he should be able to go beyond the word or image he uses into the light of that which they have the power to reveal and flood them with it until they overflow with its suggestions or seem even to lose themselves and disappear into the revelation. At the highest he himself disappears into sight: the personality of the poet is lost in the eternity of the vision, and the Spirit of all seems alone to be there speaking out sovereignly its own secrets." Mark again the turn: "the eternity of the vision." The Eternal Eye is at the back of all poetic perfection, and what this Eye visions is the Divine Presence taking flawless shape in a super-cosmos. To that shape the poet, in one way or another, converts the objects or events he depicts.

¹ Pp. 209-10. ² P. 48.

The conversion is the act put before us in the fourth and fifth lines of our *ensemble*. Every word and turn in them is worth pondering. "I caught," Sri Aurobindo makes Satyavan say. There is implied no mere touching, no mere pulling, not even mere holding. Nothing tentative is here: we have an absolute seizure, a capturing that is precise and complete. The poet gathers and grips a thing unerringly and for good. Such a gathering and gripping suggests to us a shade in the adjective "eternal", which is not directly mystical but still very pertinent to the artistic process. Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine* talks of timeless eternity and time-eternity—an eternity which is outside or beyond the time-movement and an eternity which is constituted by time itself going on and on without end. This latter kind—indefinitely continuing world-existence—poetry achieves for whatever it catches. The perfection of phrase in which it embodies its vision makes that vision memorable for ever: it confers immortality on its themes by expressing them in such a way that the expression gets imprinted indelibly on the human mind : it eternises for all future a happening or an object of the present or the past. As Landor says :

Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives,
Alcestis rises from the shades;
Verse calls them forth : 'tis verse that gives
Immortal youth to mortal maids.

Shakespeare in several places in his sonnets declares that his powerful verse shall outlive marble and the gilded monuments of Princes. In one sonnet he asks : who or what can save you, my lover, from being destroyed or forgotten? And he gives an answer paradoxically pointed:

O none unless this miracle have might,

That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Now from the poet who is the vision-catcher and from the eternal eye for which he acts the visionary we may come to what is caught, the thing visualised. It is "the sudden kingfisher". Technically we cannot help being struck by the way the adjective stands—at the end of the line. In poetry lines are either end-stopped or enjambed. Enjambment (a French word) connoted originally the continuing of the sentence of one couplet into the next instead of stopping short. In general it connotes the running on of the phrase of one line into another instead of ending with the line's end or at least pausing there as a sort of self-sufficient unit. "Sudden" makes an enjambment and it makes it with what is termed a feminine ending, a close on a syllable unstressed and extra to the standard metrical length. What it thereby achieves are a host of effects. The first effect is to startle us by the occurrence of an adjective without its noun, an occurrence besides at so marked a place in the line as its very termination. Technically the meaning of this adjective is reinforced by its unexpected terminal place. But there are still other effects. One is in relation to the verb "caught". Suddenness suggests a quick movement which takes one by surprise and which may be thought to be uncatchable. So we have the phenomenon as of the uncatchable being caught, a tribute to the catcher, a hint of the mobile miracle that is the artist mind, a mind that can overtake anything and make an imaginative capture of it. How sudden the bird was is told in the next line where it is said to be "flashing". Even something as fast and fleeting and momentary as a flash can be seized by the poet's pursuing eye. And a further shade of the miracle comes out with the word "eternal". We took this word to mean both the unforgettable everlasting value poetry gives to a mortal thing and the value which a Divine Consciousness holds as the ever-

lasting archetype of a thing that happens in the temporal world. The poet seizes flash-like objects for ever: once seized they are never submerged—if we may cite an unforgettable Shakes- pearean phrase—

In the dark backward and abysm of time.

Also, the contrast between the Divine Consciousness and the time-process is brought out by “sudden”. The character of time is transitoriness, momentariness: nothing stands still, all life is a succession of infinitesimal rapidities, a series of sudden-nesses. This constant evanescence is vividly counterposed to Eternity by the concrete figure of the sudden kingfisher. The kingfisher in its incredibly swift flight is a symbol of all time. A slower-moving object would have failed to drive home both the perpetuation that the poet achieves and the archetypal divinity he serves, and his service of that eternity is struck out most clear for us by the marked closing position of “sudden”.

We may add that if “sudden” had come in the next line, the poetic stroke would have been diminished. Suppose Sri Aurobindo had written :

I caught for some deep eye that is eternal
The sudden kingfisher's flash to a darkling pool.

Here we have eternity in one line and time in another. Do we not blur their contrast a little by this sheer division? Have you heard of Köhler's experiments to ascertain the psychology of apes? One experiment puts a banana outside a chimpanzee's cage, exactly in front of the animal but beyond his arm's reach. To the right of the chimpanzee, outside the cage, a stick is put. The ape looks straight at the banana and then turns his head to look at the stick.... The means of getting at the banana and

pulling it into the cage is there but it needs another look than the one which takes in the banana. The animal is found unable to co-ordinate the two looks and arrive at a logical procedure for getting hold of the fruit, as it would if the stick were in a line with the banana. We feel rather like the chimpanzee if “eternal” is in line one and the expression suggesting the temporal is in line two. The needed contrast which would kindle the significance of the poetic vision gets a trifle weakened: there is a slight loss of immediacy, a slight failure in the meaningful fusion of the objects presented: the revelatory intuition is retarded and we have to reach the revelation by a bit of thought-effort: the technique is not fully co-operative with the vision.

We may draw attention to some other defects also. At first sight one may feel that the whole phenomenon of the kingfisher is shown in its completeness in a single line, the second, and that this is a poetic gain. But consider the metrical rhythm of the line. Too many syllables—twelve in fact—are crowded together, creating a dancing wavering rhythm which serves ill the simple straight swift motion of the bird. Again, what stands in central focus now is the flash and not the kingfisher. Many different things may be said to give a flash: a sort of generality is grasped through the flashing, a less distinct less individualised and hence less concrete symbol is conjured up. The mention of the kingfisher seems hardly significant and inevitable: this particular bird with its special shape, colour, gesture appears somewhat wasted and correspondingly wasted is the pool which can have vital importance only if not the flash but the kingfisher with its habit of food-hunting in watery spots holds the chief place.

This point, as well as to some extent the point in regard to the metre, would be valid even if Sri Aurobindo wrote :

I caught for some eternal eye the flashing

Of the sudden kingfisher to a darkling pool.

The sole advantage over the other version would be that the contrast between eternity and time would be more forceful by the retention of a word charged with momentariness in the very line where "some eternal eye" figures. But then force would be lessened in the intended contrast between "flashing" and "darkling". Besides, to put the "flashing" before the "sudden kingfisher" is not so logical or so artistic as the other way round. The adjective for the kingfisher becomes unimpressive and almost superfluous after the intensity of "flashing": also the act of flashing and the quality of suddenness grow two separate things instead of the former emerging from the latter and being the latter itself in an intense manifestation. The alliteration of the *f*-sounds and the *sh*-sounds in the two words "flashing" and "kingfisher" loses its expressive inevitability. In the phrase "kingfisher flashing" the alliteration in the second word brings out, as it were, a power already there in the bird so that the act of flashing is the natural and spontaneous flow of the kingfisher's being and is prepared, rendered unavoidable, made the true gesture of it. If "flashing" precedes "kingfisher" we have something blurted out before its time, and if the precedence is too far ahead the alliteration itself runs to waste.

Perhaps one may urge that the first rewriting supposed by us could have a slight change in its second line and put the kingfisher itself and not its flash in the chief place :

The sudden kingfisher flashing to a darkling pool.

But then the metre will grow still more dancing and wavering : the technique would break apart from the vision all the more.

No, Sri Aurobindo's arrangement of all the words remains the most felicitous and the sort of enjambment he achieves is

also happier than any other; for no other can be so marked as an adjective divorced from its noun—"sudden" poised for the fraction of a second aloof from "kingfisher"—but carrying us on imperatively to what it qualifies. The enjambment suggests that, though momentariness is here, there is no cessation of the movement itself: we are hurried onward, pressed forward to the next line, so that we have a continuous movement of momentarinesses. Such a movement serves Sri Aurobindo's subject very appropriately, since the subject is not the kingfisher sitting out on a tree its series of moments that follow one another, but the kingfisher in motion in the time-flux, the kingfisher flashing. The suggestion of "flashing" is anticipated and prepared by the enjambed technique working through "sudden". Further, the whole last foot in which the adjective stands is what is called an amphibrach: the foot consists of three syllables—"the sudden"—with only the central syllable stressed. Metrically it is like the last foot of the Shakespearean verse already quoted:

The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling...

Sri Aurobindo¹ has called Shakespeare's last foot "a spacious amphibrach like a long plunge of a wave" and remarked about the entire line's structure of four stressed intrinsically long vowels and one stressed vowel that is intrinsically short, all of them forming a run of two iambs, a pyrrhic, a spondee and an amphibrach: "no more expressive rhythm could have been contrived to convey potently the power, the excitement and the amplitude of the poet's vision." Our amphibrach is not spacious: its vowel is not quantitatively long like the *o* of "rolling": the vowel here is a short *u* and even the final syllable "en" is almost a half-syllable. The amphibrach is a rather compressed one, but there is enough of the unstressed third

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

syllable to make with the stressed one preceding it a falling movement. Here too is a plunge, though not of a high-risen wave: it is a packed rather than a spacious plunge and as such it is quite in conformity with the small bird that the kingfisher is, and the falling movement is in perfect tune with the kingfisher's act of flying down from a tree to a pool. "Flashing" here implies not only a swift movement but also a downward one and, just as the enjambment anticipates and prepares the former, the feminine ending anticipates and prepares the latter. However, the swift downward movement of the small kingfisher would hardly be hinted so well by the amphibrach-enjambment if the last two syllables of the foot were not that significant word "sudden".

Now we reach the kingfisher itself. We shall not dwell on the metrical technique of the line given to its activity—except to make two remarks. The word "kingfisher" at the start of the line has its stress on the first syllable, initiating by the trochaic foot formed by its two opening syllables a falling movement in continuation of the same "cadence" at the end of the previous line, and the stressed syllable is an *i* intrinsically short, though just a little lengthened by the consonantal sounds after it. So we have a suggestion not only of the darting from above but also of brevity-*cum*-force and insignificance-*cum*-insistence drawing itself out, as it were, by its darting—in sum, the diminutive diver and hunter with the little body and long beak and bright plumage and proud crest. At the close of the line we have the word "pool", a stressed word with an intrinsically long vowel-sound which especially evokes a sense of something significant deep down to which the kingfisher dives. So much for the purely metrical technique. Now for a few aspects of the verbal technique.

"Darkling" after "flashing" and before "pool" is an interesting effect in the picture of the kingfisher. It literally means

being in the dark, being in a hidden state, but it cannot help bearing the sense of growing dark, of holding hiddennesses, and its function here is to tell us that the pool was a place of shadows, that it was a sort of secrecy. The very sound of the word, the combination of *r* and *k* and *l*, calls up the vision of a liquid glimmer-gloom and makes the word the most apt adjective for a thing like a pool which is a small mass of still water in which light goes diminishing as it is drawn deeper and deeper towards an invisible bottom. And then there is the play it makes with the preceding present participle “flashing”. “Flashing” in itself blends the impression of lightning with the impression of a sweep and swish of wings through the air—again the aptest term for the rapid leap of colourful bird-life. But its connection with “darkling” presents our thought simultaneously with two facts that go beyond the mere account of a bird diving for its food. We see something intensely luminous dropping into something increasingly mysterious. It is a vision of keen beauty disappearing—but not to be swallowed up and lost. We get a sense as of a masterful plunge of brightness into a dark profundity. There is not exactly the exquisite casualty of Nashe’s

Brightness falls from the air

but a kind of dangerous adventure in which life laughingly dares darkness and plucks its prey from it. There is evanescence, no doubt, the time-touch, yet within the evanescence beats a triumph. The vision of life arises as though we were being shown what the phenomena of ordinary existence would look like when they are caught by the poet for some eternal eye and given their ultimate interpretation—or rather we have at once those phenomena and the deeper version of them that is truth in eternity.

Further, you may notice that the whole event described here is

so much like the essential poetic experience itself. An airy colourfulness drops with a winged burst of revelatory light into a hidden depth in order to bring up from the depth some life-nourishing secret. We have the poetic intuition falling into the poet's inner being and capturing its contents for the poet's self-expression. And just remember that a darkling pool closely resembles an eye waiting with in-drawn expectant stillness for a shining disclosure from above which will lay bare to that receptivity what lies within the dreamer's own vigilant soul, what hides there to feed with its mysterious life the light that fell from on high.

Indeed a many-aspected statement is present in Sri Aurobindo's picture, and its relevance to the poetic process is completed by the next line which I have joined on to these two:

And metred the rhythm-beats of infinity.

The poet is primarily a seer, but his instrument for seizing his vision and communicating it is the word: it is by the inspired sound that he creates a form for his intuitive sight. The inspired sound is implicit in the poetic act—and, just as the poet's vision must ultimately have behind it the working of some eternal eye, the poet's word must ultimately have behind it the working of some eternal ear. The ultimate home of the poetic process is the spiritual "Akash", the Self-space of the Spirit, the Divine Consciousness's infinity of self-extension. And this infinity has its creative vibrations that are at the basis of all cosmos. These vibrations are to be caught, however distantly or indirectly, by the sound of poetry. In terms of our own quotation, what the poet metricises when he captures in his verse the kingfisher's downward flight and its descending wing-wafts, its plunging beat of pinions, is the rhythm-beats of the spacious ether of the Eternal Being who is the secret substance, one of whose

vibrant materialisations is the kingfisher.

Some may, however, question the verb “metred”. Modernists believe that metre is an artificial shackle on poetry from which they want to escape into what they call “free verse”. But actually no verse can be free without ceasing to be verse: if there is no regulating principle of a distinguishable sort, however subtle be its regulation, we have the laxer movement of prose. If that laxer movement tries to pass off as poetry by some device like cutting itself up into long and short lines and sprinkling a few out-of-the-way locutions on a run of commonly turned words, then we do not have real verse but a pretentious and ineffectual falsity, about whose relation to prose we shall have to say, even at the risk of an atrocious and well-worn pun, that it is not prose but worse! Poetry must have not only intensity of vision and intensity of word: it must have also intensity of rhythm. That is the demand of the Aurobindonian poetics. And how is rhythm to be intense without having a central motif in the midst of variations, a base of harmonic recurrences over which modulations play, a base which is never overlaid with too much modulation but rings out its uniformity through the diversity? In the older literatures, metre tended to be of a set form. But to be of a set form is not the essence of metre. It was so because thus alone something in the older consciousness, the strong sense of order, of *dharma*, got represented in art. When the consciousness changes and becomes more individualised, more complex, as in modern times, the metre may follow suit. Every age can make its own metrical designs and our age may devise or discover less apparent regularities and complicate or subtilise its schemes of sound. There is no harm in that, though in an epoch of individuality we cannot insist that an individual who still finds something of the older metres a natural mould for his mood-movements should mechanically conform to the new non-conformity! All must have a right to be individual—

and if people want to be boldly experimental in prosody they may do so, but the soul of metre must not be lost—or else poetry in the truest connotation will get lost with it. Even “free verse” is, when it is still true poetry, a broad pattern of returning effects, a pattern rounded off and swaying under a dextrous disguise as a single whole—and it is true poetry precisely by being not really free but just differently bound than the older poetic creation.

My own *penchant* is for metre and I grant some point to an amusing exaggeration by George Gissing. Gissing expressed horror of “miserable men who do not know—who have never even heard of—the minuter differences between Dochmiacs and Antispasts”. If you happen to be those miserable men I may tell you that a Dochmiac is a five-syllabled Greek foot composed of short-long-long-short-long and an Antispast is a four-syllabled Greek foot consisting of short-long-long-short. But I am afraid I cannot tell you more minute differences than that the former has one final long in excess of the latter, and if there is a yet minuter difference I myself shall have to live in the misery of ignorance. What, however, I do know I may concretely impart to you by illustrating a Dochmiac and an Antispast, in English prosodic terms, through a compliment to our horror-stricken ecstatic of metre:

×	/	/	×	/		×	/	/	×
An	all-wise	delight				is	George	Gissing's.	

Perhaps the compliment seems too high-pitched. But that there is an essence of truth in it will be conceded if we track metre to its origin in the Divine Ananda, the Delight of the All-wise. Sri Aurobindo has stated very strikingly the truth about metre. “All creation,” he¹ writes, “proceeds on a basis of

¹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, “On Quantitative Metre,” pp.345-6.

oneness and sameness with a superstructure of diversity, and there is the highest creation where is the intensest power of basic unity and sameness and on that supporting basis the intensest power of appropriate and governed diversity. Metre was in the thought of the Vedic poets the reproduction in speech of great creative world-rhythms; it is not a mere formal construction, though it may be made by the mind into even such a lifeless form: but even that lifeless form or convention, when genius and inspiration breathe the force of life into it, becomes again what it was meant to be, it becomes itself and serves its own true and great purpose. There is an intonation of poetry which is different from the flatter and looser intonation of prose, and with it a heightened or gathered intensity of language, a deepened vibrating intensity of rhythm, an intense inspiration in the thought substance. One leaps up with this rhythmic spring or flies upon these wings of rhythmic exaltation to a higher scale of consciousness which expresses things common with an uncommon power both of vision and of utterance and things uncommon with their own native and revealing accent; it expresses them, as no mere prose speech can do, with a certain kind of deep appealing intimacy of truth which poetic rhythm alone gives to expressive form and power of language: the greater this element, the greater is the poetry. The essence of this power can be there without metre, but metre is its spontaneous form, raises it to its acme. The tradition of metre is not a vain and foolish convention followed by the great poets of the past in a primitive ignorance unconscious of their own bondage; it is in spite of its appearance of human convention a law of Nature, an innermost mind-nature, a highest speech-nature."

The verb "metred", therefore, in the last line of our quotation may be held to be perfectly in order, especially in a context where infinity is implied to be harmoniously dynamic, eternity

is said to be the visioner of the temporal and both together emerge as the creator of poetry through the human soul.

Our second group of six lines picturing Sri Aurobindo's poetic psychology and metaphysics are part of an account of Savitri's long quest for her soul's mate Satyavan. Savitri encounters various types of spiritual seekers retired from the noisy world into woods and hills. One band of them, pressing with a motionless mind beyond the confines of thought to sheer spiritual Light, comes back from there with the native word of the supreme Consciousness, the *mantra* such as we find in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita:

Intuitive knowledge leaping into speech,
Hearing the subtle voice that clothes the heavens,
Carrying the splendour that has lit the suns,
They sang Infinity's names and deathless powers
In metres that reflect the moving worlds,
Sight's sound-waves breaking from the soul's great deeps.¹

This is a description of the poetic process at its highest spiritual pitch and it is itself a-thrill with the vibrations of what is spoken of and compasses in the closing verse the full breath of the *mantra* while concentrating in one brief expression the ultimate nature of the mantric utterance.

Yes, the whole subject is a special hieratic one, but the treatment of it sheds light on the nature of poetic inspiration in general. For, if the *mantra* is the ideal poetry, all poetry that is genuine must represent or shadow forth in its own way the mantric essence.

In our first group of six lines we listed as the divine element in all poetry the inner intuitive cast of imaginative and emotional excitement taking shape in the outer rhythmic word-gesture

¹ *Savitri*, p. 435.

and word-movement and thereby creating a perfect beauty. It is the creative intuition that is now pictured as it operates on the level of a most directly spiritual poetry. In such poetry the original power channelled by the poet comes into its own, getting its fullest scope; for has not Sri Aurobindo¹ the defining phrase: "A direct spiritual perception and vision called by us intuition"?

We begin with the basic act of "intuitive knowledge" and its stirred seizures of truth that get moulded into language: the leap upon the heart of reality's significances is at the same time a leap into words answering to them. The intuitive knowledge has two sides: the revelatory rhythm and the revelatory vision. The former is a subtlety of vibration in tune with the measureless mystery of the absolute Bliss and bringing into manifestation the unknown silences: it is in the form of a "voice" which gives the secret body of the heavenly existence a vesture woven of meaningful sound—sound that follows like a wonderfully responsive clothing the ever-indrawn identity of the Supreme. And this clothing of sound, with its rhythmic ripples, is a "splendour" at the same time that it is a "voice". The simile of a garment for sound is of high import: it shows that what is heard and what is seen are a single reality. Thus our passage's transition from revelatory rhythm to revelatory vision is natural and inevitable. A cloth of gold, as it were, is the theme—and the gold is the Light of lights, the creative fire that goes forth in a million modes and materialises as the suns with which our heavens are bespangled. An elemental incandescence projecting the contents of the Inscrutable in symbol-shapes is at work in the ecstatic heat of poetic production. The *mantra* holds it in a white state, so to speak, but something of it persists everywhere, and each poet has in him the sense of a supra-intellectual illumination no less than a sense of some primal rapture which

¹ *The Future Poetry*, p. 309.

affines his heartbeat to what the old tradition designated the music of the spheres, the concord of the universal OM. With that illumination he becomes the seer of truth just as with that rapture he becomes the hearer of it—the truth concerned being the sight achieved of any aspect of reality by means of the faculty of intuition, with its thrilled flash into the depth of any part of the world through the depth of some part of one's self.

A gloss on the triple operation sketched by the lines—intuitive knowledge that is a voice, a voice that is a splendour—may be derived from four verses elsewhere in *Savitri*:

Even now great thoughts are here that walk alone:
 Armed they have come with the infallible word
 In an investiture of intuitive light
 That is a sanction from the eyes of God.¹

Even the cloth-symbol is present and it directly serves to merge the elements of our three lines.

With these elements unified in his consciousness, the poet at his highest raises up an art-form of flawless loveliness, a Song, in which Infinity's own self-disclosing articulation is at play: the godheads pronounce each his being's central note, his inherent name-image in which the power of his immortal creative bliss resides. The master-poet, by letting the Illimitable formulate its myriad magic of deific motion through his singing, echoes in the dominant rhythms of his poetry the primal measures of the Supreme's self-expression in the multitudinous cosmos: the metres of the starry revolutions, their set accords of majestic journey through endless space and time, are caught in his designs of long and short sounds, vowel-flows and consonant-curbs, overtones and undertones, stresses and slacks, line-units and verse-paragraphs—the macrocosmic

¹ Pp. 292-3.

regularities find their reflection in a microcosm of poetic cadences, the moving worlds make themselves felt in the harmonious words. As in our first group of verses, we have Infinity's rhythm-beats metricised.

Then we have the *grand finale*—the last line which seems to bear in itself both qualitatively and quantitatively all the rest in quintessence:

Sight's sound-waves breaking from the soul's great deeps.

It is a really lengthy line because of eight step-by-step monosyllables and eight intrinsically long vowels and four consecutive stresses at the start and three at the end. The slow weighty stretched movement conveys the sense of a massive flood drawn towards earth from the distance of a divine existence—the profound secrecy of the Soul. Here again, as before, we have the Soul as the source of poetry and this source is not only deep within us but also itself a great depth, holding as it were a vast concealed ocean of experience-movements in which the Divine Consciousness is hidden and in which there is an occult oneness of our individuality with the whole world. Sensation, emotion, idea are here involved or contained in a thrilled awareness focused for poetic purposes in a luminous vision which is at the same time a subtle vibration taking the form of rhythmic words.

“Sight's sound-waves”: a marvellous turn condensing all that has been said before and constituting an entire system of poetics. Seeing and hearing are shown as fused faculties—yet each is given its proper role. Poetry brings the soul's vastness into our common life by means of “sound-waves”—it is a super-version of Homer's “many-rumoured ocean”. But the mighty billows drive home to us a burden of sight: the ocean is not only many-rumoured, it is also many-glimmered, many-

figured. The poet's work is principally to set himself astir with the shine, the hue, the contour, the posture of things. Significances start within him as vivid pictures, imaginative conjurations, symbolic hints: through them he enjoys the subjective and the objective worlds and by them he traces the beauty and truth of things and attains to a comprehension of details, interrelations, totalities. However, the poet's seeings are of such an intensity and come projected from such an ecstasy-vibrant fount that they burst upon us with a verbal declaration of their intents. Each sight has its own manifesting sound which is not just "transmissive" but "incarnative", embodying with a living intimacy and piercing directness the gleaming stuff and stir of the Soul's revelatory contact with reality.

And this sound is best compared, as by Sri Aurobindo, to waves. For, it is a sustained march with a rise and fall, its rhythms variously modulating on a basic recurrent tone and breaking upon the receptive mind and heart and sensation not only with happy spontaneities like the changing dance of spume and spray but also with powerful profundities like the sweep of unremitting rollers and persisting undercurrents and now and then a mysterious ground-swell.

We may remark how the image of the sea springs up time and again in Sri Aurobindo's poetry about the poetic phenomenon. It is particularly there when he refers to that phenomenon's highest resolution in the mystic and spiritual key. But it has a vital role elsewhere too. In the course of recounting Savitri's girlhood and its inclusion of an experience of all the arts he tells us:

Poems in largeness cast like moving worlds
And metres surging with the ocean's voice
Translated by grandeurs locked in Nature's heart
But thrown now into a crowded glory of speech

The beauty and sublimity of her forms,
 The passion of her moments and her moods
 Lifting the human word near to the god's.¹

The unsealing of grandeurs from subtle dimensions of Nature to cast an interpretative light on the world-pageant through a rich packed poetry could very well be true of ancient epics like Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Vyasa's *Mahābhārata* or mediaeval ones like Kalidasa's *Kumārasambhava* and *Raghuvamśa*. The last phrase about man's word being upraised to neighbour a divine utterance, rather than itself becoming such, is a pointer to the secular character of the poems concerned. This character is recognised all the more when we have a clear description of spiritual poetry, a use of the word in a different fashion and for a different goal:

Invested with a rhythm of higher spheres
 The word was used as a hieratic means
 For the release of the imprisoned spirit
 Into communion with its comrade gods.
 Or it helped to beat our new expressive forms
 Of that which labours in the heart of life,
 Some immemorial Soul in men and things,
 Seeker of the Unknown and the Unborn
 Carrying a light from the Ineffable
 To rend the veil of the last mysteries.²

Those other poems had their regard on Nature's forms, moments, moods and set free in the visible world deeper meanings, greater dynamisms that are like presences of hidden lords of Nature, living puissances that are secret cosmic agents. Now we are told of an attempt with the help of inspiration from "higher spheres" and not merely inner ones ("Nature's heart"),

¹ *Savitri*, p. 410. ² Pp. 409-10.

to liberate the soul of man, the "spirit" encased in the sensing, feeling, thinking body, and enable it to grow one with divine entities, share in the very being of secret cosmic agents, Nature's hidden lords, and even in that of transcendental powers, god-heads beyond the universe and not only behind it. Further, side by side with the spirit's linkage with divinity through poetic rhythms brought straight from "above," hieratic or sacred poetry endeavours for a manifestation of divinity "below". It gets into touch with "the heart of life" where a World-Soul toils at evolution within man's physical mould and Nature's matter. Charged with the drive of this evolutionary Dreamer, it aims to infuse his idealistic dynamism into the stuff of outward existence, so that novel modes of thought and desire and perception may be realised, expressing openly through the activities of this stuff the fulfilment of the World-Soul's venture across the ages to revel here and now the arcade Eternal, the masked Absolute. Yes, the poems spoken of in our earlier quotation are like the masterpieces of Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa rather than like the Vedic hymns, the Upanishadic slokas or that super-Vyasan rarity—the Gita—in the midst of the *Mahābhārata*. But these too, in Sri Aurobindo's imagination, have their own sound-waves of sight: through their metrical movement "the ocean's voice" is heard in them no less than in the mighty compositions that move from everlasting to everlasting in the worlds of the gods and whose imitations on earth are the Rishis' songs of "Infinity's names and deathless powers"—mighty compositions pictured by Sri Aurobindo in the last Book of *Savitri*:

The odes that shape the universal thought,
 The lines that tear the veil from Deity's face,
 The rhythms that bring the sounds of wisdom's sea.¹

¹ P. 760.

Large structured chants bearing the formative force of the Ideas on which the cosmic plan is founded, intensely lyrical phrases capturing with visionary power the secrets of the Supreme Beauty, patterns of sustained sonorities conveying fathomless suggestions and ultimate significances that escape all defining speech—this progression of poetic elements in the supernal modes concludes deliberately on the image of wide waters. That image makes the right climax. For most in the *mantra*, even as mainly in every species of poetry, it is the rhythmic vibration which holds the keenest sense of the life-throb, so to speak, of the Infinite and carries the greatest potentiality of re-creating the human existence in the mould of the divine. This vibration serves as the strongest instrument to stir the deepest recesses of our being and awake in them an answer of sympathetic vision to the sight of the Eternal which in one shape or another all poetry fundamentally strives to lay bare.

Keeping “sight” and its “sound-waves” in mind we may sum up in the words of Sri Aurobindo¹ our whole exposition: “Sight is the essential poetic gift. The archetypal poet in a world of original ideas is, we may say, a Soul that sees in itself intimately this world and all the others and God and Nature and the life of beings and sets flowing from its centre a surge of creative rhythm and word-images which become the expressive body of the vision, and the great poets are those who repeat in some measure this ideal creation, *kavayah satya-śrutāḥ*, seers and hearers of the poetic truth and poetic word.”

¹ *The Future Poetry*, p. 41.

COVENTRY PATMORE'S CHARACTERISATION OF THE POETIC PHRASE*

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS FROM *SAVITRI*

Coventry Patmore distinguishes the poetic phrase under three heads: piquancy, felicity, magnificence. And he remarks that the supreme phrase of poetry mingles all these qualities in various measures.

Let us try to define the terms. Piquancy in poetry is an agreeable sharpness, a pleasantly disturbing irritant, a sort of fine paradoxicality. "Felicity" is a term very often used for all kinds of appropriate poetic expressions. In a special sense distinct from what the other two terms connote, felicity in poetry is a strikingly apt delightfulness which does not stimulate as piquancy does but which, even when ingeniousness is present, causes a deep satisfaction with the keen beauty-part of the utterance. Magnificence is a power widening and enrichening the vision: it has an overwhelming loveliness rather than a stimulating or a delighting one, it is a bold lavishness though what is lavished is yet well-organised.

We may broadly illustrate Patmore's classification with three brief examples from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. For piquancy, take:

God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep.

For felicity, mark:

All can be done if the God-touch is there.

* Adapted from No. 5, 14 and 15 of *Talks on Poetry*.

For magnificence, revolve:

I cherish God the Fire, not God the Dream.

The first line hits off with a profound cleverness the stupidity of so-called wise men where the manifestation of the Divine such as Sri Aurobindo has in mind is concerned, a manifestation ultimately transforming the physical being itself. The wise men will chatter away, discussing the pros and cons of the Life Divine in the integral Aurobindonian sense. I shall not be surprised if some of them, who may be married and harried men, turn round and say: "Why all this bother and exertion about the Life Divine when our urgent need is really the Wife Divine?" But even if they are not so foolish they will still be too much lost in intellectual hair-splitting and abstract logic to note the growth of God going on under their very noses. The only growth which they can note under their noses is their own moustaches. And perhaps there too they do not see that the moustaches are often shockingly untrimmed. Then there is the word "sleep". After their barren discussions they are contented enough to go to sleep—or perhaps each of them is already asleep during the logic-chopping by the others, and certainly all of them, even while jabbering away, are all the time asleep to the fact of God's increasing manifestation. The word "sleep" picks out with devastating brevity both the complacency and the unconsciousness of those who wag their tongues in a merely mental way about occult and spiritual phenomena.

If we look a little closely at the two parts of the piquant statement we shall observe a number of important implications. When God's growing up is contrasted to the wise men's talking and sleeping we should understand that the former activity goes on in a great silence and that this silence differs radically

from the quiet into which the wise men fall by slumbering. The difference is precisely that the wise men *fall* into a dark quiet whereas God grows *up* in a peaceful perfection of light: the adverb "up" is significant, showing the progressive direction of the evolving divinity, a direction opposite to the downward movement, the sinking and submergence of awareness, that is the sleep of the mere mind after its bouts of pretentious philosophy about things beyond its ken. I may also mention a breath of the inevitable, a throb of the spontaneously organic, in the alliteration of "God" and "grow", as if to grow up were an act of the very nature of God. The presence of the same vowel *o*, though first in a short sound and then in a long one, strengthens the effect. The only other pointed alliteration is of "while" and the opening word "wise" of the second half of the statement. This, together with the assonance the two words make by their long *i*'s renders it subtly appropriate that God's growth should take place during the period when talking and sleeping are carried on by wise men. And what God does is itself timed with what these men do by the long duration of the vowel, the quantitative lingering of the voice, in all the three vocables concerned: "grow", "talk", "sleep".

So much for the piquant line. The first thing to mark about the next phrase is the deeply melodious ring, the tolling as of a golden bell, with which Sri Aurobindo starts it: "All can be done...." A grand announcement is made with a controlled power of musical language. But the line is felicitous not only because it is beautifully moving in a poisedly powerful way: it is felicitous also because it has a subdued piquancy exquisitely held in the contrast between "All" and "touch". It says that everything is possible—and the omni-possibility is said to be compassed by nothing more than a touch of God: one finger of light brought by the hand of His Grace can dissolve adamantine

difficulties, ages of massive darkness. And observe how the vowel-quantities help out the significance. The smallness required of the miraculous agency is conveyed by the short though stressed vowels in "God-touch", while the bigness of what is miraculously conquerable is there in the long stressed vowel of "All". But the conquest of the apparently big by the apparently small is shown by the stressed yet short vowel of "done" which anticipates and prepares the quantities of "God-touch". And a further expressiveness is achieved by the repetition, in "touch", of the very sound that is short in "done". We may even see the intuitive work of the poet's art in the fact that the same sound which is long in "All" is repeated in a short form in "God" as if to render the latter word capable, in its own terms, of matching the former whose meaning is to be met and coped with by its meaning.

If there is any line in European literature of which I am most reminded, both as regards sound and substance, by this of Sri Aurobindo's, it is Dante's famous

E la sua voluntade è nostra pace.

Sri Aurobindo's line rivals Dante's as well as affines itself to it in what I may call the art no less than the heart. Before I proceed, let me tell you that in Italian the *c* is always *ch* (while *ch* is always *k*) and the *e* is always pronounced when it is an end-vowel, unless it gets merged in another vowel immediately following it. To begin the comparison: there is here also the note of a deeply melodious bell, though now more with *l*'s than with *n*'s, in the opening: "E la sua voluntade." Literally, the whole line may be Englished: "And His Will is our peace." Such a translation has an admirable directness, but the majesty of the original is absent. And absent too is the note we have spoken of. To catch this note as well as something of the poly-

syllabism which gives the Italian that majesty, a translator has written:

His Will alone is our tranquillity.

An excellent line, this, but a little different in its total effect from Dante's. It has the resonance, yet not the directness of the original. And the sense of cessation of unrest brought by the *s* and *ch* sounds of "nostra pace" is lacking. I think this sense will come out if we write:

His Will alone is our serenity.

Then we shall have three sibilances—those in "His" and "is" and "serenity"—answering to the three related sounds, sibilant or semi-sibilant, of the Italian "sua" and "nostra" and "pace". Going back to Sri Aurobindo's line, I may draw your attention to the fact that my comparison of it with Dante's in the original does not end with the bell-rhythm. The *s* and *ch* of "nostra pace" are also almost exactly present here, though in reverse order, in "touch" and "is".

So much for the art of the two lines. What about the heart? I suggest that the same heart is in both, approached and traversed from two opposite sides. In the Dante line we may read a profound faith in the rightness of God no less than in His almightiness—almightiness against which nothing can prevail. Only God's Will is the ultimate determinant, and whatever He wills is right. A full acceptance of His omniscient decisions, a total surrender to His omnipotent acts—in short, an utter love which wants nothing except what He in His wisdom and power gives—is the sole road to attaining peace. This means a humility before the afflictions and adversities of life, a resignation to the blows of circumstance, a devotion that never doubts in the

midst of doom—because all unpleasant happenings are seen to be the workings of God's inscrutable hand which nothing can stop and which even through the worst has to be taken as doing the best for us. To illustrate most acutely what is meant, we may look at a stanza from a French poem of the sixteenth century, Malherbe's celebrated *Consolation à M. du Perrier sur la Mort de sa Fille*. In this stanza, which is the final one, Malherbe, after saying that the rich and the poor alike are subject to the law of Death, *la Mort*, tells the grieving and inconsolable father:

De murmurer contre elle et perdre patience
 Il est mal à propos;
 Vouloir ce que Dieu veut est la seule science
 Qui nous met en repos.

In the last two lines we have Dante's simplicity of penetrating intuitiveness transposed into a moving clarity typical of French verse at its finest. John Chadwick whom we Aurobindonians know as Arjava has rendered Malherbe most sensitively throughout the poem and especially in the closing verse (where the pronoun "her" in his version refers, of course, to Death):

Impatient murmurs or embittered turning
 Against her, deem not best;
 Save willing the thing God wills, no other learning
 Shall bring us to our rest.

The religious quality recommended is a mixture of what Indian Yoga terms *samatā*, *śraddhā* and *bhakti*, a mixture of equanimity, faith and devotion to be practised *vis-à-vis* all occurrences and conditions; and the result is spiritual calm.

Sri Aurobindo's line also involves God's Will, for it speaks of

things being done with the help of the God-touch and wherever there is a conscious doing there is will. Here too we have the idea that God's Will is almighty and that it is the most right force—yes, right, since surely the “All” that can be done is not anything mean or cruel or depraved: Sri Aurobindo is not saying, “You can succeed in being a thorough devil if you call God's touch to your aid.” The thing which ought to be done, the action which would lead to the true, the beautiful, the good, is intended—though not in a conventional sense which shies away from the bold, the grim, the stormy—and we are told that no matter how difficult or impossible-seeming such right action may be, we shall be victorious by having on our side the power of God in even a small measure. But the rightness and the power of God are visioned here primarily not as the establisher of things as they are: they are visioned primarily as the changer of established things. Of course, God is both. He has brought forth an imperfect universe, but only in order to make it perfect. And, since He has brought it forth, even in the most imperfect state of affairs His Will towards perfection must be at work, so that whatever imperfection is present is perfectly in place and carries His Will in itself. The universe therefore is a paradox. It is at the same time God's Will already manifest and a mass of difficulties and darknesses in which this Will has to manifest progressively and create bliss and light. A single truth with two faces is before us and the Dante-line shows one face and the line of Sri Aurobindo shows the other face which must be seen if we are to transform earth-existence into the Life Divine.

Even Death, in Sri Aurobindo's view, need not be accepted as an irrevocable decree of God. Just as ignorance in the mind has to be removed, just as misery in the emotional being has to be abolished, just as incapacity in the life-force has to be eradicated, so also whatever in the physical form tends towards disintegration—that is, towards death—has to be conquered. “A tall

order,” the sceptic may sneer—but to grant that God’s perfection awaits to be manifested is logically to imply this extreme triumph, though the triumph can be got only after a colossal travail. An unavoidable part of the instrument for that triumph is “willing the thing God wills” and taking with love the varied operations of the Universal Spirit in its drive through our little likes and dislikes. Then only can we build on a solid foundation—the foundation of a supreme peace—the hope and aspiration and effort of transfiguring the scheme of the universe with the fiat of the Transcendent Spirit that awaits with its archetypes to remould man and evolve even in man’s body the Immortal. So we may bring the Aurobindonian idea to some kind of expository focus of relation with the Dantesque by picking up again the theme of Death from Malherbe’s poem and writing against Chadwick’s translation of his final stanza the following:

Impatient murmur nor embittered turning
 Against Death wins escape:
 Only the God-touch on man’s body burning
 Calls forth the immortal shape.

The sense here is that we certainly have to start with the Dantesque attitude: we must stand imperturbable, since neither complaint nor resentment can free us from mortality. The sole help lies in receiving the luminous touch of God more and more upon our physical substance and converting the clay-sheath into the concealed divine original of it.

Now for a few words on the magnificence of that third verse from Sri Aurobindo:

I cherish God the Fire, not God the Dream.

I must clear immediately a possible misunderstanding. I have

always described the poet as, among other things, a dreamer. I have meant that the poet looks beyond the actual and thrills to a hidden perfection, to the Transcendent Spirit's veiled archetypes and to the Universal Spirit's secret omnipresent beauty. God the Dream in this sense must never be rejected and should be cherished if God the Fire is to come into play. In fact, the two are fused—and in poetry itself the reverie and the realising rapture are indissoluble. Has not Gerald Manley Hopkins characterised the very activity of the poetic imagination as deriving from this rapture, in that phrase of his—

Sweet fire, the sire of Muse...?

The Dream against which Sri Aurobindo makes his Savitri pit herself is an indulgence in high visions accepted as wonders that cannot take birth—wonders about which he writes:

Behold this fleeting of light-tasselled shapes,
Aerial raiment of unbodied gods;
A rapture of things that never can be born...
Cloud satisfies cloud, phantom to longing phantom
Leans sweetly, sweetly is clasped or sweetly chased...

The mysticism which Sri Aurobindo proclaims through Savitri's lips is a dynamic mysticism opposed to lying content with a Divine Perfection shining in some ever-alooft ether, a beautiful but issueless splendour. It holds God to be a power self-effectuating in the world of men, not merely a Light but also a Fire, the Truth that conquers by consuming our imperfections. Nor is the Fire-idea confined to the Power-aspect of God. Dreams such as Savitri abjures have a far-awayness that can never be palpable to the heart. Fire is the very inhabitant of the heart—nay, it is the heart's own substance. When God is

Fire, He is an intense intimacy—a supreme Love close and all-consummating. With His centre in the seat of longing, He becomes a rapture that can radiate forth into the physical world and make it rich with a wide and wonderful communion, a manifold infinite oneness. To approach and call into ourselves and treasure as our delight a Godhead conceived and felt as what Patmore in a magnificent phrase of his own has termed a “crimson-throbbing Glow”—to do this is to make possible God’s incarnation in each of us, to do this is to bring the God-touch that can do all and to help God grow up in the midst of the foolish wise men of the world. Thus Sri Aurobindo’s magnificence of phrase reveals the pure yet passionate Yoga that is the secret of the irresistible divine potentiality asserted by his felicity of phrase and the ground of the spiritual evolution that his piquancy of phrase prophesies.

We may conclude with two points about the technique of the line. First, the three parts of the verse—“I cherish/God the Fire,/not God the Dream”—are held together in a subtle role of continuity by the occurrence of *r* in each. Secondly, the word “cherish” is most effectively in tune with the positive content of the statement carried by the word “Fire” as distinguished from the negative content of the word “Dream”. For, “cherish” means, according to the Oxford Dictionary, not only to nurse, foster, cling to, hold dear but also to keep warm—and its very sound suggests the peculiar substance and activity of fire: the rich delicacy that is a scorching softness, the childlike quiver that is a rapture-rush.

In connection with this line we may watch the very soul of the poetic process coming into its own through the several revisions *Savitri* underwent in Sri Aurobindo’s constant endeavour to lift it higher and higher in spiritual content and form. In the earlier versions we find a play of penetrating revelatory idea reaching its fulfilment just short of that absolute profundity of

suggestion which is so easy and natural in an increasing degree in the later recasts. The last of these versions has Savitri declaring to Death:

Advance, O Death,
Beyond the phantom beauty of this world,
Of its vague citizens I am not one,
Nor has my heart consented to be foiled.
I cherish there the fire and not the dream.

We have here an effective statement, but the poetic point is made with a mingling of the piquant and the felicitous rather than with the magnificent outstanding. By itself this is no fault. What may be regarded as a slight shortcoming is that the line's "there" directs us beyond itself to a preceding referent—"my heart"—and prevents the sheer self-sufficiency distinguishing the world's greatest one-line utterances.

Sri Aurobindo moves towards this quality in a variant dating back to the same early period:

I cherish, god, the fire and not the dream.

A very impressive affirmation is achieved, piercing with a certain finality to a fundamental posture of militance and intransigence in a region of happy illusions. No doubt, the word "god" with a small g, applied as it always is to Death in the poem, has again a reference backward, but it is not too much of a bar to self-containment: it can be taken as a generality instead of a particularity. In any case, we are in the presence of the *mot juste* with this line. In that fine form the phrase would be a credit to any poet, and nobody would think of any falling short until he saw how Sri Aurobindo suddenly brought what we may term the *mot inévitable* in the ultimate recension of the passage:

Advance, O Death,
Beyond the phantom beauty of this world;
For of its citizens I am not one.
I cherish God the Fire, not God the Dream.

The full potential of the penetrating revelatory idea is released, the expression acquires the utmost intensity, the rhythmic movement an absolute concentration. The omission of the line about Savitri's "heart" and, in the verse preceding it, the dropping of the adjective "vague" and the introduction of the linking "For" give the formulation a spare directness as well as a close-jointedness. And these characteristics serve also to set off the closing phrase's new directness of a dense rather than a spare kind and its break-away, as it were, from the passage into an ether of psychological attitudes free from all contexts. Further, by comparison with the older version we may mark how in the closing phrase, with its capitalised *G* and the term "God" ringing out twice, the speaker's inner being at its profoundest and at its most forceful is laid open and startlingly suggests without the least veil that even in spirituality there can be a crucial choice between divine truths, on which may hinge the entire destiny of man the evolutionary aspirant.

As a Parsi, I find Sri Aurobindo's magnificent phrase especially appealing. The Parsis are known as Fire-worshippers. Their temples hold the Supreme Being in the symbol of Fire. Day and night the flames are fed on sandalwood and what burns in every Parsi temple today is a fire lit from the one which the Parsis brought, guarded most loyally, most lovingly, from Iran after the Arabs had overrun the country and threatened to kill or convert. The faithful few toiled across the sea in small boats and sought refuge in India cherishing God the Fire. And this beloved glory had come through long ages of sandalwood-sustained force from the great golden presence kindled by the

prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster to the Greeks) in remote antiquity. The self-same Fire that was set burning thousands of years ago has burned without cessation right up to this day, thanks on the one side to the zeal of the Zarathustrians and on the other to the tolerance of the Hindu faith that sees a myriad ways to reach the Divine and finds no way alien to its own essence. And perhaps it is because the Parsis made their home in the midst of India's multi-minded aspiration and realisation that they have developed a receptivity to all kinds of cultures—easily assimilating various values, eastern or western—and that some of them have become Aurobindonians as if they had been born to be such.

I may add that this turn on their part is aided by a historical fact. The Fire-cult is as much Vedic as Zarathustrian and the Vedic spirit lives on in Sri Aurobindo who has written the poignant poem called *Bride of the Fire*, the splendid poem named *Bird of Fire*, the book of translations from the Rigveda entitled *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*. Thus the magnificence of the line which he has put into the mouth of Savitri is no accidental flare-up of spiritual fieriness in him: it is the organic expression of a Vedic-cum-Zarathustrian affinity and focuses in a fiery credo a sustained experience such as he voices in his *Descent*:

Thoughts that left the Almighty's flaming mansions,
Blaze in my spirit.

EZRA POUND'S CLASSIFICATION OF POETRY *

EXAMPLES FROM *SAVITRI* AND OTHER POEMS

We have divided, *à la* Patmore, the poetic phrase into the piquant, the felicitous, the magnificent. Now we may make another kind of division—three classes, each of which can hold all the three Patmorean types. I shall borrow it from the Anglo-American modernist poet Ezra Pound. I believe Pound is at present in a mental home—but not because he is a poet. Poets are already mad in a special way—they cannot go mad in the ordinary manner: it must be the non-poetic avatar of Pound that has qualified for the mental home. Anyway, his classification of poetry which I am about to adopt hails from his early days when his was only the poetic madness which is well known from ancient times—the *furor poeticus*, as the Romans characterised it.

Pound offers us the three heads: Melopoeia, Phanopoeia, Logopoeia. The first term is easily seen as the Greek for “Song-making”, the third as the Greek for “Word-making”. The second looks somewhat obscure, but we may remember the last half of the word “epiphany”: this half connotes “appearing, showing, manifesting”. So Phanopoeia means “Vision-making”. It is concerned with images. But we must not identify it with what is called Imagism. Imagism is the work of a particular movement or school of poetry which arose round about 1915 as a reaction against the vague emotional poeticism of the later Victorian age and insisted on poetry with a clear outline and a hard core, generally one image set forth in objective language. Pound himself was among the leaders of this school and perhaps took it to be the best practitioner

*Culled and enlarged from Nos. 16, 17, 22, 32, 33 of *Talks on Poetry*.

of Phanopoeia. We should not restrict our notion by any such *penchant*.

Broadly speaking, all poetry is concerned with images, since the poet is primarily the seer, the artistic visualiser. But, while poetry is based on sight and insight, not all of it has the image-aspect in prominence. The two other aspects that can stand out are Melopoeia and Logopoeia. In the former we are impressed overwhelmingly by the music of the verse: often the very structure invites being set to music. Phanopoeia resembles not music so much as painting and sculpture. Logopoeia is the poetic play essentially of ideas: it employs words principally for their meaning: as Pound puts it, "it is the dance of the intellect among words"—it is the conceptive word as distinguished from the musical or the pictorial-sculpturesque. But I should like to stress Pound's characterisation of it as "dance". For, unless it has rhythm and harmony, posture and gesture along with the markedly intellectual theme, it cannot be "poiesis" at all.

Musical poetry, like any other, is itself divisible into several modes. There is the early Milton effect—

With sweet, reluctant, amorous delay—

which may be matched with the early Sri Aurobindo:

Sweet water hurrying from reluctant rocks.

Of course, the art in both these instances is not merely of sound-beauty: there is an expressiveness in the sounds and in the arrangement of the words. Thus the Miltonic delay in its quantitative no less than its qualitative character is suggested by the three adjectives in succession prolonging the phrase before the latter reaches its significant complete-

ness and resolution in a word whose final stressed syllable is itself a long open vowel-sound. Similarly the Aurobindonian hurry goes home to us in four ways: (1) the double accentual pressure of the opening spondaic foot, particularly with the first syllable an intrinsic long; (2) the five *r*'s running through the line; (3) the last two of them making a marked alliteration in the very words where clustered consonants (*ct*, *nt*, *cks*) imply impediment and unwillingness, an "amorous delay" caused by the rocks' sense of the water's sweetness; (4) the occurrence of the same sound *s* at the end of the line as at the beginning and nowhere else in the verse, thereby rounding off, as it were, the initial motif in spite of the hindering double consonant in which it figures.

Melopoeia is also in the late Milton effect about all who

Jousted in Aspramont, or Montalban,
 Damasco, or Marocco, or Trebisonde,

conjuring up the exotic, the out-of-the-way, the rich and rare, the mighty and magnificent by the sheer power of nomenclature. A comparable effect, now not with a fivefold surge of golden-gonged geography but with a fivefold wash and ripple of silver-tongued hagiology, is Rossetti's roll-call of "Lady Mary"'s attendants in Heaven:

Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
 Margaret and Rosalys.

Sri Aurobindo's recital of the list of Apsara-companions of the peerless Urvasie, dancer in the courts of Indra, is at a yet longer liquidity of proper-nouned loveliness:

Menaca, Misracayshie, Mullica,

Rambha, Nelabha, Shela, Nolinie,
Lolita, Lavonya and Tillottama...

It is possible to be intoxicated with such Melopoeia, just as Marcel Proust could never tire of that enchantment from Racine:

La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë.

(The daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë.)

But we do not have here the finest that poetry can offer in this *genre*, lacking as it does what Rossetti called "fundamental brain-work". We need a deeper pleasure if we are to rest with Melopoeia. And this pleasure is not found even in the early Milton and early Sri Aurobindo we have cited; for their meaning is still not vital enough. Much less can we stop with effects like Tennyson's

The mellow ouzel fluting in the elm
or his more famous and quite perfect

The moan of doves in immemorial elms
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

From early Sri Aurobindo we can bring a fairly flawless snatch of the same witchery:

unseen and near
The windlark gurgles in the golden leaves,
The woodworm spins in shrillness on the bough...

But surely Melopoeia cannot claim its true climax here.

Perhaps the greatest master of climactic Melopoeia is Virgil. According to Arnold Bennett, the most marvellously rhythmical line in all poetic literature is Aeneas's gesture of helplessness when Queen Dido of Carthage asks him for the story of Troy:

Infandum, regina, jubes renovare dolorem.

The ring of profound pathos in these Latin vocables is as good as impossible to transfer into English. The nearest I can attempt is:

Queen, you bid me recall a grief no words can fathom,
or else:

Words cannot utter, O Queen, the sorrow you bid me
remember.

Then there is that other cry in which a whole world of aching human experience obtains its repose in a resignation one with heroic hope:

O passi graviora! dabit deus his quoque finem.

Sri Aurobindo has essentially caught its charmed anguish and wisdom in his English version:

Fiercer griefs we have suffered; to these too God will give
ending.

Dante also is no mean master of the same art; and Milton of *Paradise Lost* can match the poets of both the *Aeneid* and *La Divina Commedia*. Indeed Milton demonstrates most

impressively how Melopoeia could be not only lyrical but also epical, a stupendous music in which a grandiose meaning finds organic reverberation. Sound bearing out the sense, not with an obvious echo but with a power of stirring the mind to the magnitude of the events related, meets us in a passage like:

Him the Almighty Power

Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky,
With hideous ruin and combustion, down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms.

We have various phrase-lengths concealed within the pentammetrical uniformity of appearance—a changing artistry of pauses lends both diversity and aptness to the musical motives. There are several varieties of sound-texture woven across and down the rich fabric. But what envelops us most unforgettably is the *ensemble* of the melopoeic symphony, the superb sonority of the polysyllabism punctuated at suitable places by the dynamic directness of monosyllables especially at the end of each line and with its peak-point in that emphatic “down” after both a trisyllable and a pause. However, it would be incorrect to assert that the masterly effect is due to the sound-art alone and not to the word-craft. Sri Aurobindo has well remarked with reference to the epical Melopoeia of the passage: “the sound, the rhythmic resonance, the rhythmic significance is undoubtedly the predominant factor; it makes us hear and feel the crash and clamour of the downfall of the rebel angels: but that is not all, we do not merely hear as if one were listening to the roar of ruin of a collapsing bomb-shattered house, but saw nothing, we have the vision and the full psychological commotion of the hideous and flaming ruin of the downfall, and it is the

tremendous force of the words that makes us see as well as hear.”

Sri Aurobindo's comment signs us towards Phanopoeia. But we shall linger yet a little and pass to a deeper dimension of Melopoeia. The moods Milton turns to music belong, for all their imaginative quality, to the outer mind sovereignly inspired and he has complete grasp over the thing to which he responds audio-visually: practically nowhere do we feel that he is in the midst of elusive presences—presences, of course, that are no less concrete for being elusive but that leave our outer mind incapable of entering with certitude into the mood musicalised. It is different with Virgil and, among past English poets, with Shelley. But Virgil and Shelley themselves differ. Both make their sweetest songs out of saddest thought; but the elusive element in Virgil leaps out of an earthly poignancy whereas in Shelley it plays within an ethereal one. A single instance may suffice:

Though the sound overpowers,
Sing again, with thy dear voice revealing
A tone
Of some world far from ours,
Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.

Here we have Melopoeia about Melopoeia itself—song-making about singing—but, despite an actual woman being the singer, the voice heard by the poet is not of the earth, and his own verse is also shot with an inner rhythm. Halfway through the passage the aerial music begins to be more recognisably of a kind which may be designated Intonation or Incantation. Intonation or Incantation is a rhythm which does not arise so much from the words heard as from an echo they make in a mysterious dimension of our being. It has been created in the poet as

if his eyes were turned inward and fixed on some occult or spiritual presence and then with the light of it on his consciousness his breath brings forth in sound the thrill of that light, making his words throw a spell on the hearer and plunge him to his own being's secret places. Doubtless, all poetry has an inward-drawing force, but there is a mood and a rhythm that have it in a special degree and render poetic lines spell-binding.

Among modern poets, de la Mare and Yeats are the two that breathe the inner rhythm most audibly, though the former is only mysterious and the latter semi-mystical with what are known as "the middle worlds". For the full mystical Intonation, the plenary spiritual Incantation, we have to go to Sri Aurobindo. Sometimes we catch his inner rhythm in a single line—a haunting hexameter filled with a secret divine solace and strength for all the fumbles and stumbles of our mortality:

Ever we hear in the heart of the peril a flute go before us—

or a hushing pentameter emptying us of every travail, even the happy ache in us of the world's teeming wonder, natural or supernatural:

Unweave the stars and into silence pass.

Sometimes an Alcaic stanza, charged with suspense, sets before us an uplifted poise of the liberated soul:

He who from Time's dull motion escapes and thrills
Rapt thoughtless, wordless into the Eternal's breast,
Unrolls the form and sign of being,
Seated above in the omniscient Silence—

or a Sapphic verse, gradually gathering momentum, carries

the thrilled sense of a supernal inspiration visiting a widely waiting inwardness:

Slow my heart-beats' rhythm like a giant hammer's;
Missioned voices drive to me from God's doorway
Words that live not save upon Nature's summits,
Ecstasy's chariots.

Sometimes a blank-verse apostrophe is tense with the very words from Nature's summits and they are employed to invoke the Supreme Word that has created not a mere poem but a whole world and has the power to re-create it—the Supreme Word that is the Divine Mother turned towards the universe instead of being rapt in Her own self of infinite light, to which the apostrophe makes a reference in the third person while addressing Her aspect of the universe's archetypal Truth in the second:

O Truth defended in thy secret sun,
Voice of her mighty musings in shut heavens
On things withdrawn within her luminous depths,
O Wisdom-Splendour, Mother of the universe,
Creatrix, the Eternal's artist Bride,
Linger not long with thy transmuting hand
Pressed vainly on one golden bar of Time,
As if Time dare not open its heart to God.
O radiant fountain of the world's delight
World-free and unattainable above,
O Bliss who ever dwellest deep hid within
While men seek thee outside and never find,
Mystery and Muse of hieratic tongue,
Incarnate the white passion of thy force,
Mission to earth some living form of thee...

Perhaps the sheer acme seems reached on the grandest scale in the whole poem *Rose of God*, which for its colourful complexity sustained through twenty lines requires separate detailed treatment.¹ But in that poem and even in the above excerpts it is difficult to say whether we are dealing with Melopoeia or Phanopoeia. As we shall see, Logopoeia too can fuse with an incantatory Melopoeia.

Clear-cut Phanopoeia can be either a pure description or a tissue of simile and metaphor. Similes of a certain kind are themselves descriptions while functioning as comparisons vivifying a theme all the more. Such similes have been dubbed Homeric, because Homer, taking one or two main points in common between objects or situations or persons, launches again and again on long comparisons which are complete pictures in their own right—small dramatic scenes inset into the main visual reconstruction: the *Iliad* contains 180 full-length similes and the *Odyssey* 40. Virgil, Dante and Milton also paint such pictures, but perhaps the best versions of the Homeric comparison outside Homer are in Matthew Arnold's blank-verse narratives—particularly his *Sohrab and Rustam*—and in the early works of Sri Aurobindo: *Urvasie, Love and Death* and *Baji Prabhou*. We may cite one from Sri Aurobindo. He is describing the heavenly nymph Urvasie awaking from a swoon into which she fell under the abducting assault of a Titan. She awakens to the presence of her saviour, King Pururavus:

As when a child falls asleep unawares,
At a closed window on a stormy day,
Looking into the weary rain, and long
Sleeps, and wakes quietly into a life
Of ancient moonlight, first the thoughtfulness
Of that felicitous world to which the soul

¹ See the next essay.

Was visitor in sleep, keeps her sublime
 Discurtained eyes; human dismay comes next,
 Slowly; last, sudden, they brighten and grow wide
 With recognition of an altered world,
 Delighted: so woke Urvasie to love.

I shall not linger over the metrical qualities—modulation, pause, enjambment—or the verbal except to mark the phrase: “sublime discurtained eyes.” The first adjective does not only mean: “exalted” by the wonder visited during slumber. I believe the literal Latin shade is present as in that phrase where, after saying that God made animals earthward-looking, Lucretius tells us: “os sublime dedit homini”—“He gave man an uplifted face.” Sri Aurobindo’s “child” awakes with her eyes physically uplifted, looking above: a concrete pictorial touch goes with the general psychological suggestion. “Discurtained” has a twofold meaning in the reverse manner. It seems to signify more than just “opened by parting of the lids”: here to the concrete sense is added the idea that the earthly veil by which the eyes are shut off from the soul’s world has been temporarily removed. Especially as this adjective follows “sublime”, it yields that idea in sympathy with the psychological suggestion of the latter: the experience of exaltation is accompanied by the experience of revelation.

Now to our business. One may think that such lengthy similes are mostly decorative, but in fact when the poet has worked with true imagination they throw a subtle light upon a situation and bring out some truth from behind the surface of things. Sri Aurobindo speaks of a child. Urvasie, by being compared to this child, is revealed as a soul of innocence; she is, after all, a nymph of heaven, an Apsara and, as the poem says afterwards, the Apsaras remain ever pure, no matter what they do. The simile makes the child who has fallen

asleep wake in the midst of moonlight and keep awhile the feeling of the supernatural felicity explored in dream. Moonlight here has a very significant role. The moon is an old Indian symbol of Divine Nectar, supernatural felicity. If, then, the child awakes into a world whose familiarity is found pervaded and altered by "a life of ancient moonlight", a universe as of some primeval mystery laid bare and bestirred by a pure splendour, is it surprising that she should retain the "thoughtfulness" of the felicitous dream-world? Although "human dismay" comes for a moment, it is brightness that finally remains, and the last word of the simile is "delighted", a word which, as applied to the eyes that "grow wide" still in the moonlight, strengthens further the moon's symbolism and the continuity of its light with the atmosphere of the dream-felicity. All this illuminates the love-experience into which Urvashie woke. Just as the swoon into which she had fallen was due to a monstrous attack on her, comparable to the child's day of storm and "weary rain", Urvashie's love-experience, which is essentially one of bliss, is shown to be a white luminosity belonging to some ageless depth of mysterious being and beatitude, some depth into which she must have plunged during her swoon just as the sleeping child is said to have sojourned in a paradisaal realm. The elaborate simile has indeed afforded us in a charming way an insight of Urvashie's life and love.

Insight of one thing through the sight of another: this is the function of figurative language. And, in availing himself of that function, the poet —as Aristotle long ago noted—is most characteristically poetic. He is not the inhabitant of a world of distinct particulars, though particulars acquire a rare uniqueness when seen by him. A wind of wonder blows through his consciousness, and over the ordinary world is spread a strangeness which makes each stone brother in beauty

to which Helena has turned all his soul, so that in destruction no less than in life there is nothing for him save the rapture of her beauty.

The world to the poetic vision is a pageant of symbols mutually interpretative, and in this it is akin to mystical insight; for, mysticism, in one of its aspects, is very insistently the Cosmic Consciousness. Still, a difference exists between the two. What is—to use the celebrated Coleridgean term—"the esemplastic imagination" in the poetic experience is to the mystic a direct realisation—in his being's very stuff rather than in an imaginative mirror—of "the one Spirit's plastic press", as Shelley puts it. Hence we may regard the poetic experience at once as an initiator of mysticism and as a phenomenon incomplete without the life spiritual lived for its own sake. This experience, for Sri Aurobindo, proved to be both. He who dallied with "the sweet-lipped rain" knew that the passing of the years, from youth towards old age, were meant

To warn the earthward man that he is spirit
Dallying with transience...

And with the growth of time the imaginative faculty, gatherer of the many into a single significance, deepened into concrete contact with the hidden World-Self and entered into realms behind and beyond the physical, the vital, the mental and touched Realities which the imagination tries to figure forth by simile and metaphor but which in their supernatural "plane" are substantial in their own right. These Realities are no abstractions needing to be vivified: they hold in themselves the divine originals of earthly objects and can be seen and felt. Shape and colour and palpable stuff in the most actual sense are intended by Sri Aurobindo when in *Savitri* he makes the spiritual aspirant reach at the top of his inward journey

White chambers of dalliance with Eternity
And the stupendous gates of the Alone.

Phanopoeia at its most intense, at its most fundamental is here.

Equally intense and fundamental but in another manner is the Phanopoeia of a *Savitri*-line like:

Earth's winged chimeras are Truth's steeds in heaven.

Here occult vision is absorbed into an epigrammatic statement, a thought-disclosure. Phanopoeia is inextricably wedded to Logopoeia; and we may take the line as our starting-point for a consideration of logopoeic poetry proper. Nor have we far to go for it. This line does not stand alone; it is immediately followed by another after a comma, and the two make a perfect occasion for comparing the phanopoeic and the logopoeic:

Earth's winged chimeras are Truth's steeds in heaven,
The impossible God's sign of things to be.

Let me first explain the meaning. A chimera is a queer mythical creature with a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail—and, as if this combination were not enough, its mouth breathes fire. Sri Aurobindo has made the chimera even queerer than it usually is: he has given it wings—with, I think, a purpose. He uses the word "chimera" for something fantastic in idea, and what he means to say in his first line is: "All strange apparently immaterialisable dreams in earth's mind, all fanciful seemingly unattainable desires in earth's heart—these are not a mere imaginative play of impossibilities: already are they realities in the depths of the unknown Divine, realities as natural as horses, and they are heavenly originals, truths of God, whose distorted representatives on earth are the chimerical notions of

man, notions which have some quality of aspiration about them as if they were cries sent up to the Supreme, as if they were set winging like prayers to the Omnipotent. Further, the realities existing in heaven, the original truths corresponding to the chimeras, are part of a plan for the earth. Just as steeds are part of the plan actualised in the earth's past and present, those original truths are part of a plan for the earth's future."

Now, with the full meaning of the line before us, we may look at the next. It expresses the same essential idea without any image-colour—almost abstractly, one may say, but with perfect pointedness and faultless rhythm—that is, in a thoroughly poetic way yet by suppression of all imagery, except perhaps for a light indirect touch of it in "sign". Here is Logopoeia—poetic word-thought—in concentrated clarity matching exactly the compact picturesqueness of the preceding verse's Phanopoeia—poetic word-image.

This concentrated clarity is intuitive in essence, though it may be intuition taking a mental shape and not acting in its own original body. The intuitive nature of it—a straight simple pointer that indicates much in little and suggests more than says it—can be gauged by comparing the verse with these two from elsewhere in *Savitri*:

The high gods look on man and watch and choose
Today's impossibles for the future's base.

The mind's own accent—expository in its mode—is very well heard in this extended pronouncement. The pronouncement mentalises also our "chimera"-line by mentioning "the high gods" and thus bringing in that line's "heaven" no less than the next one's "God". In passing we may remark that the "chimera"-line is also intuitive by its suggestive compactness, but it blends what Sri Aurobindo calls illumination with its

intuition, a dynamism of brilliant imagery giving the body of pure insight a rich vesture of manifold spiritual sight. Something of this illumination as well as something of intuition transforms very felicitously the mental content in the Phanopoeia of the second half of the following glimpse, from Sri Aurobindo's semi-philosophic colloquy *The Rishi*, of the same theme as in our "quotes" from *Savitri*:

O King, no thought is vain; our very dreams
 Substantial are;
 The light we see in fancy, yonder gleams
 In the star.

The Logopoeia of the first half here is again typically mental—without a marked drive of intuition, though poetic nonetheless and having, as it were, in its tail-end a faint foreshadow of the intuitive turn which is about to come in its wake. We can observe from the *Rishi*-excerpt and the *Savitri*-“quotes” that Logopoeia is most effective when it is intuitive rather than expository. And at its highest it can make as memorable poetry as anything Phanopoeic. No line, however astonishing in image, has surpassed the Dantesque assertion which we have culled when discussing Patmore's triple characterisation of the poetic phrase:

E la sua voluntade è nostra pace.

(His Will alone is our serenity.)

Or take these five lines from *Savitri*:

Our being must move eternally through Time;
 Death helps us not, vain is the hope to cease;

A secret Will compels us to endure,
 Our life's repose is in the Infinite;
 It cannot end, its end is Life supreme.

There is a controlled power in the passage, achieving a refined sublimity that states in marmoreal yet living poetic language the final truth about all existence in the cosmos. One phrase in it—

Death helps us not, vain is the hope to cease;
 A secret Will compels us to endure—

reminds us of some lines from Sri Aurobindo's early blank-verse narrative *Love and Death*, lines which too we have cited before. After lamenting the frustrating transience of life for human beings who come into birth with "passionate and violent souls", Ruru views their entry into the Underworld and cries:

...Death helps us not. He leads
 Alarmed, all shivering from his chill embrace,
 The naked spirit here...

Very vivid and forceful Phanopoeia is in this phrase. But the Logopoeia of the other lines is no whit less poetic in its own fashion, and the line following them—

Our life's repose is in the Infinite—

is one of the greatest—quite fit to rank beside the verse we have drawn from Dante. In fact, it is the articulation of an idea affined to the one in Dante. Both the verses speak of ultimate rest being found only in God: Dante refers to God in action, Sri Aurobindo to God in pure existence, but, as the next line makes it clear, this God-existence is in connection with a

life ending not in a cessation of action but in a supreme living, a divine activity in the world as well as beyond. The repose is a consummation, not a quiescence, and in this consummation, according to Sri Aurobindo, there would be what in another peak-moment of spiritual Logopoeia he has described as

Force one with unimaginable rest.

We may well close with this peak-moment, but I have an interesting set of logopoeic passages which would help us differentiate the ways in which the intellect can “dance” among words as it functions on different “planes”. Shakespeare is the phanopoeic artist *par excellence* and that too in a supercharged packed fashion. He has very few elaborate comparisons. His mind is too active and darting for them. But images are the very fabric of his thinking and feeling: his poetry pulses with metaphor upon metaphor and he can rarely stop his Logopoeia from passing into Phanopoeia. However, in a certain passage in *Macbeth* he keeps the true logopoeic level for several lines. There Macbeth is debating the murder of King Duncan who is a guest for the night at Macbeth’s castle:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come...

It is rather a complex passage. The first “done” means “ended”, the second “completed”, the third “performed”. The sense is that if the murder can be regarded as a perfectly

finished thing when it is carried out completely then the best course is to commit it soon. This sense is elaborated in the next phrase. "Trammel up" means "arrest, bind up, entangle". Macbeth wishes that the murder would have no sequel, run no risk of later discovery and ultimate punishment: the fatal blow which would lead to the cessation of Duncan's life—his surcease—should be in the moment of that cessation a total success for ever and constitute in itself the whole history of the crime—the full being and the entire ending of the dark deed here upon the earth. If there were no after-effects, no possible results dangerous to the criminal, then Macbeth would consider the success sufficiently tempting for him to ignore the next life and risk whatever might be the consequences after his own death, whatever punishment doled out by God in the other world. The passage is very effective in expression and is regarded as high poetry by the critics. But, as they have noted, it has a sibilant hissing quality rather than the quality of melody. It can certainly not be called melopoeic. Yet its broken rhythms and its tendency to harshness of sound are themselves deemed by criticism the master-means of poetically bringing about the communication Shakespeare intended—the communication of desperate haste and breathless excitement. As Cleanth Brooks and R. P. Warren tell us, the lines give with their lack of ordinary melodious effects the impression of a conspiratorial whisper. Not only Melopoeia but also Phanopoeia is absent through most of the passage. Though the language is extremely vivid and has a strong seeing power in words like "trammel" and "catch", explicit imagery is wanting except towards the close where we have "the bank and shoal of time". A shoal is a place of shallow water in which there is a submerged sand-bank. It would seem that Shakespeare is imaging death as a strip of land between two seas—the one being time, the other eternity. Personally I do not quite grasp the appositeness of the metaphor, but Shakes-

peare's language is vigorous enough to make the picture of the bank and shoal, upon which the act of "jumping" the next life is to be done, a telling one.

The passage as a whole is intense Logopoeia of what we may term the vitalistic mind at work: the nerves are at play, the sensations are astir all through the thinking process. In contrast see the working of the mind proper, the true reflective being drawing up the living energy into its own uses: here is a speech made by Milton's Satan at sight of the infernal regions to which he has been condemned:

Hail, horrors, hail,
Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell,
Receive thy new possessor; one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than He
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built
Here for His envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

A Titanism is articulate in the lines, but, however misdirected, the sheer sense of the mind's independence is magnificent: this independence is celebrated in language hailing from the mental plane itself. It would be difficult to excel the poetic quality of this passage where thought and not sight or music is the main feature. But we may observe that nothing is abstract: we feel a movement of concrete thinking: the very ideas are as if objects

which the mind arranges and juxtaposes, and the language too is what I may call eyeful thought, though the eyefulness is not as marked as in Shakespeare. This eyeful thought may be contrasted to the thoughtful eye that is the character of Phanopoeia. The eye, of course, has always to be at work in poetry; but it can be either adjectival or substantival. The difference in the position it occupies may perhaps be illustrated most impressively by two passages from Sri Aurobindo.

There is the sestet of the mighty Nirvana-sonnet:

Only the illimitable Permanent

Is here. A Peace stupendous, featureless, still

Replaces all. What once was I, in It

A silent unnamed emptiness content

Either to fade in the Unknowable

Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite.

The last line is phanopoeic, all the others logopoeic. But here too we have no touch of dry intellectuality. All the less because Sri Aurobindo, though couching his expression in terms of thought, is really writing what he has called "Overhead Poetry"—poetry breaking from secret planes of consciousness above the mind. It is Thought with a capital T. Not the vitalistic mind, not the mind proper, but the spiritual mind is vibrant throughout, with its touch on spiritual realities that are known by subtle inner senses or by direct identity through an extension of one's sheer self. Eyeful Thought uttering an experience that goes beyond all earth and all hell and even all heaven into a pure infinitude where name and form are effaced has been set artistically working by the realisation Sri Aurobindo had at Baroda in 1908.

A further vivification, as it were, of the Unknowable spoken of is given us in some lines in *Savitri* where also the Overhead

planes function but through an eye with a capital E. The Thoughtful Eye is now at work to show us that the Unknowable is not an impotent void or a divine darkness: even when there is a negation of all that we can conceive, even when there is an emptiness of all intelligible positives, what remains is yet a plenary light: only, that plenitude is lost in complete mystery for our conception. This mystery, however, must not be named either Being or Non-being: beyond Being, it passes into Non-being—yet even to say Non-being is to define it too much and also confine it too much. Observe how Sri Aurobindo compasses the mystery:

If all existence could renounce to be,
And Being take refuge in Non-being's arms
And Non-being could strike out its ciphered round,
Some lustre of that Reality might appear.

The terms are at once Yes and No. Existence is said to give itself up to non-existence, but the giving up is a refuge and what it gives itself up to waits as if with arms. The arms connect up with the ciphered round: the ciphered round is, of course, zero, but the circle is suggested to be formed by the joined arms of Non-being around Being. And when Non-being is said to strike out its own zero, what do we understand? On the one hand, a deeper negation than Non-being, as if the zero were too concrete as well as too limited to indicate the supreme vacuity which the Ultimate is to our experience. On the other hand, to strike out the zero is to cancel the negation brought by Non-being and suggest a new positive which yet is not Being. The last line supports this suggestion and, in the act of calling the Ultimate "that Reality", differentiates the Ultimate from both "existence" and its opposite. Further, a nameless thrill is hinted by all the lines in the process of the ever profounder

immergence. Being lets itself be absorbed as though into an indescribable Lover, and Non-being has a dynamism of self-denial, and what results and remains breaks out like light: a flush and a warmth no less than a vividness are present. Finally, we may go on to note that after all the enigmatic Yes and No have been practised the realisation is just "some lustre": not the whole Presence of the final Absence but merely a bit of its all-swallowing glory comes into view. This stroke of "some"-ness is the crowning surprise: we think that everything possible in order to plunge from the deep to the deeper and to the deepest has been done and then we are told that the utmost we can do can bring no more than a moiety of the sovereign secrecy to our realisation!

I have spoken of the Thoughtful Eye acting here; but the thoughtfulness is so great and the whole poetic phenomenon is so much a kind of super-Hegelian dialectic that we may significantly adapt Sri Aurobindo's own Nirvanic phrase:

What once was Eye, in It
A silent unnamed emptiness.

At the same time the emptiness is full of visionary potency and stands on the verge of either fading in the metaphysical Unknowable or thrilling with the visionary Infinite's luminous seas and regaining Phanopoeia. It would be best to speak of Logophany.

We should take even one more step. There is a Miltonic flux and reflux of sound, a Song Celestial heaves and falls, a mysterious Melopoeia is composed, the Logophany is also a symphony. The three classes proposed by Pound are in unison—or, as he might himself like us to say, they become the pounding of a single giant heart of quintessential spiritual poetry.

ROSE OF GOD*

A COMMENT ON ITS MYSTICISM AND ITS POETRY

I

Mysticism rising to a climax of the incantatory art—there we have that poem of Sri Aurobindo's: *Rose of God*. The most famous of mystical symbols he has steeped in the intensest inner light and lifted it on a metrical base of pure stress into an atmosphere of rhythmic ecstasy. To receive the true impact of this poem we have to read it with a mind held quiet and the voice full-toned; but we must be very clear in our enunciation, not allowing any emotional fuzz to come between the poet's significant sound and the intuitive depths of our intelligence. It is not a mere emotional thrill that he is communicating—the thrill is of some experience in which the Divine is feelingly visioned and visionarily comprehended and comprehendingly felt. Our reading has to convey accurately the quiver and colour of sight, the luminous structure of idea, the meaningful enthusiasm of emotion. A controlled intonation in which every word, while accorded its full music of vowel and consonant, stands out distinct and keeps clearly patterned in syntax its intuitive relation with its companion words—thus have we to make the Aurobindonian *Rose of God* paint and perfume our speech.

There are five stanzas, each conjuring up an aspect of the Epiphany which Sri Aurobindo poetises:

Rose of God, vermilion stain on the sapphires of heaven,
Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies
seven!

* Adapted from Nos. 18 and 19 of *Talks on Poetry*.

Leap up in our heart of humanhood, O miracle, O flame,
Passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name.

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being,
Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing!
Live in the mind of our earthhood: O golden mystery, flower,
Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous
Hour.

Rose of God, damask force of Infinity, red icon of might,
Rose of Power with thy diamond halo piercing the night!
Ablaze in the will of the mortal, design the wonder of thy plan,
Image of Immortality, outbreak of the Godhead in man.

Rose of God, smitten purple with the incarnate divine Desire,
Rose of Life, crowded with petals, colour's lyre!
Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and magical
rhyme;
Bridge our earthhood and heavenhood, make deathless the
Children of Time.

Rose of God, like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,
Rose of Love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of Grace!
Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's
abyss:
Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's
kiss.

At first glance one may get a little bewildered and think that here are splashes of oriental hues and a luxury of decorative effects for their own sake. But really there is no riot in the splendour: we have a many-sided system in it, exploring the secrets of the Divine Rose. A mystical metaphysics and psychology, as it were, unfold before us in the succession of vibrant images.

Let us get a little to close quarters with this metaphysics and this psychology. But let me warn you that since they are mystical we cannot be very sure about everything we say.

There are two sides of spiritual reality presented in each stanza. The first two lines everywhere are charged with the Glory that is on high, the Reality above the human consciousness, ever perfect and ever manifest. In the last two lines the same Reality is invoked to reveal itself by evolution in the human consciousness and to become progressively a part of earth or, rather, to make earth progressively a part of it. What is eternally in bloom in the Divine is asked to blossom anew in our time and space—a Brightness that, unlike as in Nashe's line, never falls from the air. The nature of this Brightness can be gauged by a brief review of the figures under which the spiritual Reality is shown. The basic figure is, of course, that which gives the poem its title. The Rose is the symbol of Beauty and here we have the God-Rose—God as Beauty. But what shall we understand by the Beauty of God? Beauty is perfection of form. But there are levels of perfection and the determinant of each level is the type of being that assumes the form. The Divine Being makes the supreme perfection of form, the infinite Beauty: that is, a Form which is perfect with an infinite Being come to focus in it, a Perfect Form in which Divinity is individual yet is not limited by individuality but overflows the Form into the universal.

Now the question is: Does the Rose of God which stands for such a Form mean the same as the Deathless Rose about which Sri Aurobindo has spoken in *Savitri*?

In *Savitri* he has written of Being's "effulgent stair" climbing from the human mentality to "the Eternal's house" and he has put on either side of the steps of the journey upward through the mystical consciousness "the heavens of the ideal Mind". On one side are

The mighty kingdoms of the deathless Flame
and on the other

The lovely kingdoms of the deathless Rose.

Sri Aurobindo says further:

Above the spirit cased in mortal sense
Are superconscious realms of heavenly peace,
Below, the Inconscient's sullen dim abyss,
Between, behind our life, the deathless Rose...
World after coloured and ecstatic world
Climbs towards some far unseen epiphany.

Sri Aurobindo tells us that even in our mortal existence we can be visited by touches of those worlds, but the fullness of the Deathless Rose is beyond.

This does not run counter to the suggestions in the poem we are studying. However, what we have in this poem is a certain sheer supremacy of the Rose: the Rose of God is the "far unseen epiphany" itself and not merely "the heavens of the ideal Mind". And we have also a fusion, as it were, of the deathless Rose with the deathless Flame whose kingdoms are said to be "mighty" as distinguished from those that are "lovely". Our poem, though presenting the Divine under the aspect of Beauty, seems to exceed the distinction drawn in the passages of *Savitri*: it takes us to a summit Reality which is the All—Eternity itself directly meeting us in the Form of Divine Beauty. In the language of Indian mystical thought, this Form bringing forth into manifestation the mystery of the Absolute, this Rose of God, is the One whom Sri Aurobindo hails in *Savitri* as

Mother of the worlds,
Creatrix, the Eternal's artist Bride,

and also as

The Mother of all godheads and all strengths
Who, mediatrix, binds earth to the Supreme.

And that eternal Mother-beauty—the prime Creatrix, the ultimate Mediatrix—is the form of a fivefold divineness of being. The Rose of God is a perfection crystallised from the substance of an absolute Bliss, an absolute Light, an absolute Power, an absolute Life, an absolute Love. And through its crystallised perfection these five divinenesses can become active and transformative in the finite substance of mortal man.

The divineness to which Sri Aurobindo devotes the first stanza, figuring the Rose of God as the Rose of Bliss, is what Indian mystical thought has always not only considered the original fount of creation but also linked most immediately with beauty. Essentially the perfection of form conveys delight because essentially delight composes it. All art is creative delight expressing itself perfectly in one mode or another. Of course, art has significant values also, but they are taken up and absorbed into the creative delight. Similarly, God's joy in His own creative possibilities lets loose the interrelated scheme of significant forms we call the universe: the universe is God's *līlā*, God's play, an expression of the Ananda which He takes of His Conscious Being. That Ananda constituting the God-Rose is vivified for us by Sri Aurobindo against a background which he terms "the sapphires of heaven". Try to visualise an illimitable stretch of unbroken bright blue—the supreme Ineffable shining far and aloof like a cloudless sky, the Absolute lost in the heaven of Its own self. Then see the burst of the primal

Form like a flower out of formlessness, a vermilion Rose standing out in an incandescence of Bliss from the sapphires of that absorbed heaven and holding a multiplicity of self-expression. Seven are said to be the ecstasies blended in that Bliss and each ecstasy contributes to the Rose a tinge of its own. The seven-fold self-expression has a full flower-aspect and a growing bud-aspect. The flower-flush is the Nameless Absolute in its passion of manifestation in the superhuman azure above. The bud-glow is the same Absolute manifesting as the mystical Name, the Divinity relating its miracle-flame to the human heart and leaping up there, a progressive perfection, in answer to that heart's cry for happiness.

A semi-parallel to the two opening lines and to a couple of phrases in the rest of the stanza is found in a passage in *Savitri*:

An all-revealing, all-creating Bliss,
 Seeking for forms to manifest truths divine,
 Aligned in their significant mystery
 The gleams of the symbols of the Ineffable
 Blazoned like hues upon a colourless air
 On the white purity of the Witness Soul.
 These hues were the very prism of the Supreme,
 His beauty, power, delight creation's cause.

Here the background's aspect is not told. But the prism and the Witness Soul's purity suggest it. What this Soul perceives by being white is some supreme Whiteness's spectrum. Thus the background is implied to be white, not blue. However, all else has an affinity to our poem's overture and when the Bliss-revealed Bliss-created hues are a prismatic blazoning forth we have rainbow-colours—a manifestation "fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies seven".

One may ask why the ecstasies are said to be seven. Even as far back as the Rigveda we find seven a sacred number. It

answers to a truth of mystical experience, a truth recorded in many languages and not only in Sanskrit. But the Rigveda itself, though giving prominence to this number, does not confine its numerology to seven: what is most often spoken of in it as seven is also at times counted by it as five, eight, nine, ten and twelve. So, whether we take up seven or another number would seem to depend somewhat on our line of approach and our frame of reference. But perhaps the specific mysticism of Bliss demands seven rather than any other number. It cannot be for any merely poetic reason that both here and in the *Savitri*-passage about the spiritual Bliss this particular number is involved. Still, I believe that over and above mystical truth there must be in poetry an artistic justification for such a choice. The mysticism of Bliss must be rendered artistically inevitable. In the *Savitri*-lines the prism-image is an inevitable felicity after the Witness Soul's "white purity". In our poem, what is the corresponding aptness of association?

The blue background hardly calls for a sevenfold spectrum. We may argue that a rainbow always hangs against the sky's blue, but there is no necessary connection between this azure and that iridescence. Besides, there is a difference between the colour-suggestions of the *Savitri*-lines and ours. The ecstasies in the latter, though seven like the prism-hues, cannot be thought of as running into all the shades of the rainbow: blue and green and indigo can have nothing to do with the Rose of God. Shades that are allied to the Rose-impression are the only ones imaginable here. So the background need not be the white which is required for the rainbow-spectrum: the blueness of the background is no anomaly, and we must look for another artistic justification than that arising from the background colour. I submit that the justification is to be found in what the seven ecstasies vermillionly dynamise and what the sapphires hold static. Artistically, the ecstasies are inevitably seven

because “seven” rhymes proportionately with “heaven”. “Eleven” too is a rhyme, but it is not proportionate: the word has an extra syllable at the start. Sri Aurobindo’s context, from the purely artistic point of view, demands no more than a suggestion of mystic multiplicity, and the word he has employed serves best that suggestion. For, whatever truth shines out here from ancient esoteric vision in general and from spiritual Bliss-experience in particular becomes inevitable in terms of art by the logic of proportionate rhyme.

Can we say with precision what “seven” stands for in the poem? In reference to the ancient Indian scriptures, Sri Aurobindo has explained this number by a scheme of planes diversely distinguished at different historical periods. In the most popular version the number denoted the three transcendental planes of *Sat* (Being), *Chit-Tapas* (Consciousness-Force), *Ānanda* (Bliss), the three cosmic planes of *Swar* (Mind), *Bhūvar* (Life) *Bhūr* (Matter) and the intermediate plane of *Vijñāna* or *Mahas* (Truth-Consciousness, Supermind, Gnosis) which links the higher triplicity to the lower and formulates in its own transcendence the archetypal cosmos. On every plane there is a sevenfold existence with one term or another in the forefront and the rest subordinate. The phrase “ecstasies seven” is itself Vedic (*sapta ratnāni*) and perhaps the ecstasies in the poem are kindled by the characteristics of the seven planes; but the poem does not specifically build its significance on a sevenfold chord, it has a fivefold harmony, and the constituents of the harmony are not distinct planes or principles of existence. So here it may be better for us to remain with the mysticism of the poem’s metaphysics than to probe the metaphysics of its mysticism.

As regards the fivefold harmony, it is interesting to note that, while the *Rose of God* is addressed as Bliss, Light, Power, Life and Love, it is invoked first to “leap up in our heart of

humanhood”, then to “live in the mind of our earthhood”, next to be “ablaze in the will of the mortal”, still next to “transform the body of the mortal” and, finally, again to accomplish a leaping up connected with the heart, though now the appeal is:

Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature’s
abyss.

The heart is brought in twice: the poem opens with it and rounds off with it. One may object that the second heart is not the same as the first and that Sri Aurobindo means simply the very core of what the Rose of Love is asked to arise from. But is it possible to take this heart as a mere metaphor? Surely not. Love is too obviously a thing of the heart in a non-metaphorical sense. Besides, the first stanza and the last have too many resemblances for the second heart to be metaphorical. In the former we have “ecstasies”, in the latter we have “rapture”. Similarly, “fire-passion” corresponds to the earlier “fire-sweet” and “passion-flower”. “Miracle” and “flame” are matched by “the home of the Wonderful” and “Beatitude’s kiss”. The very word “Beatitude” recalls the word “Bliss”. And a general eye-catching sign of the essential affinity of the two and consequently of the two hearts is the opening line in either stanza: on the one hand the words about the Rose of Bliss—

...vermilion stain on the sapphires of heaven—

and on the other the phrase about the Rose of Love—

...a blush of rapture on Eternity’s face.

A blush can be well defined as a vermilion stain and when this stain is, as the next line shows, a tinge of ecstasy, it is nothing save a blush of rapture. Psychologically, Bliss and Love are connected with each other and both are connected with Beauty.

As Sri Aurobindo says in *The Synthesis of Yoga*¹, “the general power of Delight is love and the special mould which the joy of love takes is the vision of beauty.” He also says:² “Love is the power and passion of the divine self-delight and without love we may get the rapt peace of its infinity, the absorbed silence of the Ananda, but not its absolute depth of richness and fullness. Love leads us from the suffering of division into the bliss of perfect union, but without losing that joy of the act of union which is the soul’s greatest discovery and for which the life of the cosmos is a long preparation. Therefore to approach God by love is to prepare oneself for the greatest possible spiritual fulfilment.” If Bliss is the fount of creation and is the immediate substance of Beauty, it is by the passion of Love that it creates the object of Beauty and, by loving this object, knows itself most intensely and most profoundly with the utter richness which the poem calls “ruby depth of all being”. And, when it is self-expressed as a cosmic multiplicity, the play of Love is fundamentally the secret of the self-expression, the secret which in our evolutionary universe emerges slowly and by degrees. Sri Aurobindo has written:³ “A supreme divine Love is a creative Power and, even though it can exist in itself silent and unchangeable, yet rejoices in external form and expression and is not condemned to be a speechless and bodiless godhead. It has even been said that creation itself was an act of love or at least the building up of a field in which Divine Love could devise its symbols and fulfil itself in act of mutuality and self-giving and, if not the initial nature of creation, this may well be its ultimate object and motive.” Bliss is the original movement of the Divine in which Love is implicit, Love is the Divine’s final movement by which Bliss grows most explicit. They are essentially a single process with two ends or

¹ *On Yoga, 1* (Pondicherry, 1956) p. 675.

² *Ibid.*, p. 623. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

extremes: they stand at one extreme as the Creatrix binding the Supreme to earth, at the other as the Mediatrix binding earth to the Supreme.

Not that the “heart” of the last stanza is exactly the same as the “heart” of the first: there is a shade of difference, and we shall deal with it. But the second heart is far from being just a metaphor and the poem does come full circle by beginning with the Rose of Bliss and concluding with the Rose of Love. Before we deal with the shade of difference we must understand why the Roses of Light and Power and Life are put in between. Originally, Divine Bliss brings forth the cosmos by a certain conceptive and regulative principle which converts the free multiplicity-in-unity of that creative Ananda into an ordered pattern of what we may term idea-realities seen and selected out of it: a process of Knowledge and a process of Will, a Truth-vision and a Truth-organisation come into play in order to project and establish in various related centres and steady cosmic rhythms the contents of the All-Delight. Anything deserving to be termed a universe, whether it be an archetypal universe for ever perfect or one like ours in which perfection is hidden, needs a guiding Wisdom-sight and an executive Wisdom-force to guard it from lapsing into a teeming amorphousness. Thus there must be a Rose of Light and a Rose of Power. Conversely, when the creative Bliss has to blossom fully in a human existence which develops from an apparent absence of it, the building of this Ananda in the heart of humanhood must call into play the Rose of Light, the great Wisdom-bloom, the golden Mystery, to act in our mentality as the Seer held like a guest in marvellous Yogic hours and directing with sunlike Truth-knowledge the growth of the supreme Ecstasy. But Truth-knowledge is not enough: the diamond-radiant Truth-power must be there within our will to organise what is luminously visioned and to set forth masterfully its own plan and to work out an image of

the immortal Light by destroying the circumambient darkness of Ignorance.

What about the Rose of Life? If we may go by the suggestions in the poem, it is not something unrelated to the Roses of Power, Light and Bliss. It is characterised as divine Desire that has a smiting drive and comes incarnate: it is also a multi-form movement of colourful collectivity and a creator of concordances in a Time-existence made deathless. The smiting drive towards deathless incarnation connects up directly with the infinite force and might and the piercing diamond halo spoken of in the preceding stanza about the Rose of Power, as well as with the "image of immortality" there. It joins up indirectly with the sun that is the Rose of Light, the intensity of gold inseparable from the mystery of Divine Wisdom and justifying the appeal to that Wisdom to "live" in our mind. The multiform movement of colourful collectivity and concordance harks back to the seven-tinged fire-sweetness of the Rose of Bliss. But what the Rose of Life brings is outward action, concrete achievement. It translates the Truth-will into the Truth-deed, the Truth-vision into the Truth-contact, the Bliss-passion and the Bliss-multiplicity into enjoyment of substantial grasp and embodied growth. The concretisation of various centres and the dense touching activity among them so that a complex cosmos may be most objectively real—these necessities are served only by the Rose of Life..

From this Rose to the Rose of Love the transition is natural. Desire, while on one side it is akin to Will-power, is on the other side akin to Love. It is not only a drive of outward achievement: it is also a longing to seize and possess with pleasure. But it knows only how to expand and take: the movement towards concrete growth of one centre in relation to other centres of being is incomplete if the expansion is not also by self-giving, a concrete happy growth by lovingly passing into others and

achieving a multiple unification. The Bliss-passion and the Bliss-multiplicity are thus fulfilled and the original Ananda leads back with the Roses of Light, Power and Life to itself through the Rose of Love.

So we return to the problem of the two hearts—our heart of humanhood and the heart that yearns and sobs from the abyss of Nature until the Rose of Love arises from it to

Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's
kiss.

The former heart cannot be quite separated from the latter, since in us Nature herself has become human. The human heart is the top, as it were, of the heart whose bottom goes down to the darkest base of material existence. The abysmal heart must be some power of feeling that is not confined to man but resides as an upward-yearning ache in the very depths of Matter from which all living things have evolved—a power of feeling which is Nature's counterpart of Supernature's "ruby depth of all being" and which must be there in man's own depths and of which his heart of humanhood must be the frontal expression. The heart of humanhood, our emotional being, is in us the meeting-place between the mind-consciousness and the life-consciousness, it is the centre of our normal nature: whatever individual self or soul we may have is likely to be seated hereabouts. Intellectuals may enthrone the mind as the individual self; but we may cheekily ask an intellectual: "Who says the soul is the mind?" He will answer, "I say so", and, while answering, he will thump the centre of his chest and never his forehead to indicate himself! Sri Aurobindo tells us that the true soul of us is hidden behind our emotional being whose physical counterpart is in the centre of our chest. He calls it the psyche or psychic being which is in its essence a spark of the Divine. This spark came originally from the highest world

into the night of material Nature and from that abyss kept yearning towards God and rose through various organisations of matter to its present level where it has developed a human instrument: it had during its lesser development in the past a subhuman instrument and shall have in its future greater development a superhuman one.

Its general character is "sweetness and light" and its natural turn is towards the Good, the True, the Beautiful; but, says Sri Aurobindo,¹ "it is the divine Love that it seeks most, it is the love of the Divine that is its spur, its goal..." Sri Aurobindo² continues: "It lifts the being towards a transcendent Ecstasy and is ready to shed all the downward pull of the world from its wings in its uprising to reach the One Highest; but it calls down also this transcendent Love and Beatitude to deliver and transform this world of hatred and strife and divisions and darkness and jarring Ignorance. It opens to a universal Divine Love, a vast compassion, an intense and immense will for the good of all, for the embrace of the World-Mother enveloping or gathering to her her children, the divine Passion that has plunged into the night for the redemption of the world from the universal Ignorance." In the last phrase we have the *rationale* of the Love-Rose's arising from Nature's abyss: it is Divine Love, the "fire-passion of Grace", that has made a holocaust of itself by plunging into that abyss as the world-redeemer, and through the psychic being's yearning that has all the ache of this abyss within it the Rose of Love whose supreme existence is in Eternity shall manifest in earth and beatify no less than beautify our life.

Here two more quotations from Sri Aurobindo will be apt. "A psychic fire within must be lit into which all is thrown with the Divine Name upon it. In that fire all the emotions are compelled to cast off their grosser elements and those that are un-

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177. ² *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

divine perversions are burned away and the others discard their insufficiencies, till a spirit of largest love and a stainless divine delight arises out of the flame and smoke and frankincense. It is the divine love which so emerges that, extended in inward feeling to the Divine in man and all creatures in an active universal equality, will be more potent for the perfectibility of life and a more real instrument than the ineffective mental ideal of brotherhood can ever be. It is this poured out into acts that could alone create a harmony in the world and a true unity between all its creatures; all else strives in vain towards that end so long as Divine Love has not disclosed itself as the heart of the delivered manifestation in terrestrial Nature.”¹ What “all else”—mind, life-force, physical consciousness—would do without the psyche is well driven home by Sri Aurobindo: “Instead of a Divine Love creator of a new heaven and a new earth of Truth and Light, they would hold it here prisoner as a tremendous sanction and glorifying force of sublimation to gild the mud of the old earth and colour with its rose and sapphire the old turbid unreal skies of sentimentalising vital imagination and mental idealised chimera.”²

Mark that Sri Aurobindo begins by speaking of the Divine Name and ends with speaking of the rose and sapphire of Divine Love. With them we circle back to the Rose of Bliss and its “vermilion stain on the sapphires of heaven” and its “passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name”.

2

We have done our brief best with what I have called the mystical metaphysics and psychology of Sri Aurobindo’s *Rose of God*. Let us try to sum them up on our way to the sheer poetry of the piece.

¹ p. 187-188. ² *Ibid.*, pp. 189.

I have looked upon the God-Rose as the supreme Absolute grown a Form of transcendent Beauty that we may term the Divine Mother joining the Infinite to the finite by her role as Creatrix and joining the finite to the Infinite by her role as Mediatrix. Beauty is an expression of Bliss—Bliss that is the ultimate stuff of the Ineffable. So the poem begins with the Rose of God as the Rose of Bliss. Bliss, in creating Beauty, acts as a principle which sees what is to be done, the Truth to be revealed as the Beautiful: it brings a Vision-wisdom into play. So the poem moves on to the Rose of Light. But the Vision-wisdom cannot become a form of Beauty unless there is an executive Truth-will, the self-dynamising design, the force-filled icon: the Rose of Power. Power that works out a plan is yet insufficient for divine fullness. If its image is not to remain a shining inner formation without a body, if its image is to be not just a force of subjectivity but also a force of objectivity and arrive at an incarnation, there must be a divine Desire for self-growth, self-affirmation, conquest, possession, abundant empire: the Rose of Life. Even here we do not reach the end: we reach only a crowded colourful many-bodied interaction of energies throwing themselves passionately on one another and each drawing the rest to its own self. What is needed too is an inner melting of separate beings without losing the outer individuality, a melting of each into each by a passion of self-giving: a multitudinous unity has to be realised if the intensest depth of the creative Beatitude is to be caught in form. The effective power of such Bliss-oneness is the yearning between the Lover and the Beloved: hence the supreme Absolute grown a form of Beauty cannot come wholly into its own with divine Desire and without being a Rose of Love.

The Rose of God is full-blown in the transcendent realms: its fivefold divineness has to blossom gradually in the universe where human existence has evolved. The divineness of Bliss

has to manifest in the happiness-seeking heart of man, giving him the Supreme Beauty in the general essence of its delightful being, the essence of the ever-blissful Spirit. The divineness of Light has to manifest in our mental thought, giving us the truth-sight by which that Beauty may be kept unpervverted by ignorance. The divineness of Power has to manifest in our will, giving us the energy to guard and carry out the truth-sight in all our inner activity. The divineness of Life has to manifest in our embodied vitality, our physical mould vivified by the impulse to grow, the urge to possess; it will give us the actualisation of the truth-force in a collectivity of earth-shapes which have conquered Time's stroke of death. But man is not only thought, will, embodied vitality. He is also a soul which is his deepest self in the cosmos and which functions from far behind through his emotional heart which is the centre of his conscious organism. This soul is a spontaneous self-giver and God-worshipper and holds the ultimate yearning of Nature for the Divine Grace that has itself plunged into the abyss of Matter as a Saviour and urges everything higher and higher towards God. So the divineness of Love has to manifest in this soul and give it the secret of a world-wide harmony of human beings keyed by spiritual adoration to the divineness of Bliss in a detailed intensity of perfect Beauty.

"A detailed intensity of perfect Beauty"—the phrase may well be taken as a summary of the poetic quality of Sri Aurobindo's five incantatory stanzas. Let us glance at the intensest details. In the first stanza the first outstanding effect is: "vermilion stain." The word "stain" is a happy violence showing the passion that bursts forth as if with God's own rich blood forced through the rapt distance of the Absolute. The suggestion of "blemish" in the word adds a sublime piquancy to the passion, as if Divine Perfection were being divinely sullied in a spurt of self-abandon and self-disclosure. The next effect

to catch attention is: "fire-sweet." It is an unusual combination in which we have the passing of the seen through the touched into the tasted. And to get this combination needs not only a fusion of the senses but also their turning subtle to concretise the realities of inner experience. On the non-mystical level, that experience may be romantic fervour or idealistic enthusiasm. Or it may be creative art-frenzy: have we not Hopkins writing of "Sweet fire, the sire of Muse..."? On the mystical level, it is the contact of the Divine, the communion with the Eternal, bringing an all-enkindling all-consuming joy in which the separative ego is lost in an infinite radiance. Besides being remarkable in itself, "fire-sweet" is very much in place where it stands. It concentrates at the same time the warm violence of the words "vermilion stain" and the opulent ardency of the next phrase "Seven-tinged with the Ecstasies seven". It is a grip-point between the two and leads from the one to the other. This other phrase also is arresting. Here the operative term is "seven-tinged". If merely "tinged" were used, the "Ecstasies seven" would surely indicate the variety of the tingeing, but the impression would miss the intense colour-impact as well as the intense multiplicity. Although the Ecstasies are said to be only seven, we feel as if they were seven times seven and as many times flushed.

The entire last line,

Passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name,

is splendid. As my remarks in the previous survey must have made it clear, the designation "passion-flower" here has nothing to do with the genus of plants whose flower is taken in Europe to suggest the instruments of Christ's Passion—that is, Christ's suffering on the cross: I spoke of the flower-flush which is the Nameless Absolute in its passion of manifestation in the super-

human azures above and I contrasted it to the bud-glow which is the same Absolute manifesting as the mystical Name, the Divinity relating its miracle-flame to the human heart and leaping up there, a progressive perfection, in answer to that heart's cry for happiness. What endows the first half of the expression with a striking felicity is the linking of passion with the Nameless: we realise that the full flowering of the Absolute in the Rose of Bliss is only the bringing out of an intensity existing in some inconceivable manner in the very being of That which seems infinitely aloof. There is also a challenge to the imagination by the Nameless getting called a flower and the Name a bud. And in both halves of the line the use of "Nameless" and "Name" in connection with the floral image creates a rich yet elusive mysticism which is most haunting. The predominant lip-rhythm—*p, m, b, m*, and again *m*—helps to suggest not only the opening of something closed but also the mouthlike objects that are the very theme—the vermilion flower and bud.

In the second stanza, there are

Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing

and

Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous
Hour—

two excellent lines in reference to the divine original whose imperfect translation is our mental thought and which has to make this thought no longer a translation but a transference of the "great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being" (another phrase which is excellent poetry conjuring up by its long *ea* and *oo* and *e* as well as by its heavy consonantal accumulations—*gr, sd, mbl, ts, ng*—the presence itself of the high-hung massive

flower spoken of). The former line pictures very emphatically what Mind is in its origin. In its true form Mind is no mere thinker, no dealer in abstractions from outside the reality of things. The archetypal Mind is a self-existent Light, the clear and pure depth of a dynamic vision and, as shown by the succeeding phrase asking the Rose of Light to live in the mind of our earthhood, it is capable of palpitant activity. Both when it is called a Rose of Light and when designated a "golden mystery" and asked to flower in earth's mentality, we understand that it is a power of Truth that is also a power of Beauty. Coming as such, it enters the time-movement with the warmth and intimacy of a beloved guest. The Divine Mind is Wisdom, an intuitive illumination measuring out and connecting rightly, happily, harmoniously according to the essence of each detail and the essence of the *ensemble* without which the details have no final significance. That Wisdom is a great golden bloom of mystery—a sovereign and unerring insight is the mysterious gold of this great gloom, an intense loveliness and a creative artistry are the bloomed greatness of this gold that is a mystery. The Wisdom on the summits of being has all Plato and Hegel in it, every analytic acuteness, every synthetic sweep those master-philosophers possessed, but it has also a direct Seerhood far beyond their brains: it is free from the obscurities of the time-process, it is a head crowned with a Sun. The picture in the phrase about the head of the Timeless is startling in its splendour: the poetry of it brings almost a bodily feeling of a supra-physical yet not abstract or tenuous experience.

In the third stanza, the most gripping turns in my opinion are "damask force of Infinity" and "thy diamond halo piercing the night". The adjective "damask" carries out a double function. Its obvious significance is "red" and it takes our thought to the variety of rose known as "Damask Rose" and thus proves itself apt for characterising the Rose of God. But it does not only

mean “coloured like the Damask Rose”. That variety of rose came originally from Damascus, a city especially celebrated for its steel sword-blade with a wavy surface-pattern in it, and the adjective also signifies a resemblance to such a blade. The extraordinariness of the Divine Force, its quality of being most beautiful and most cutting-keen, is caught in the adjective. The phrase about the diamond halo is extremely apt too. “Diamond” is suggestive both of sheer white luminosity and of intense pure strength that masters everything: diamond is the most brilliant and the hardest substance we know. Nothing can be more a piercer of “night” than a diamond halo radiating from a Rose of Power. And we may fittingly visualise the piercing as made by rays like innumerable Damascus sword-blades shooting their sheen all around.

The fourth stanza grips us first by “smitten purple with the incarnate divine Desire”. In the vivid violence of “smitten purple” we find the innate impetuosity of the divine Desire that is self-driven as by a torture of delight and we find the burning pressure and irresistible impact this Desire would bring in getting itself incarnated, becoming subanced and shaped into flesh. Purple, to occult sight, is the colour of the Life-Force, but the phrase under scrutiny has even a practical appositeness: if you smite any part of your body you will see a purple patch on the skin! The same stanza arrests us next with “Colour’s lyre”, a turn suggestive of colour growing a sound-power, artistic vision growing a mantra, Divine Beauty capable of converting into a rhythmic whole whatever it touches and tinges with its passionate joy. The phrase prepares by a packed symbol the poetic ground for the appeal in the next line:

Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and magical
rhyme.

Perhaps the word "rhyme" is meant to convey not only a rhythmic whole but also a harmony answering in the manifestation below to the epiphany above. And the position of the word at the line-end, where rhyming is done in poetry, endows it with a finely realistic gesture, so that the point is made with a recognisable concreteness and finality.

The last stanza gives three memorable locutions. First is "a blush of rapture on Eternity's face". The word "face" is the right expressive step forward after the poet has spoken in the fourth stanza of divine Desire becoming embodied, just as the word "incarnate" there is the right expressive step after the "icon" of the third stanza and just as "icon" is the right expressive step after the second stanza's "seeing" and just as "seeing" is the right expressive step after the "fire-sweet" self-experience with which in the first stanza ecstatic passion goes forth to create. A locution of great felicity also is "ruby depth of all being". The whole richness of mystical Love is in "ruby depth": the richness would not be mystical enough if "crimson" or "carmine" or "scarlet" or any other equivalent of "red" were used. There are three reasons why they would fall short. The first is phonetic and this itself has a threefold aspect. The initial vowel in "ruby" is a long *oo*-sound evoking a sense of inwardness in tune with the noun "depth" which is qualified by this adjective. The adjective has a labial consonant akin to the *p* of "depth" and identical with the *b* of "being": a unity is established by this triple consonance as if the depth of all being could be nothing so apt as "ruby". Then there is the second syllable "by" with a short sound anticipating and preparing the long "be" of "being", thus affining the adjective to the very starting-point of the being whose depth it qualifies. All this is the phonetic felicity involved. The second reason is the concreteness given to the depth by an adjective made from the name of a precious stone: not merely redness is here but a

tangible object saving the depth from striking us as an abstraction artificially daubed over with a colour-epithet. Justice is done to the substantiality of spiritual experience. Thirdly, the ruby is a precious stone found not on earth's surface but far underground: in addition to an inward-pointing sound harmonising with the rest of the phrase and in addition to a colourful concreteness true to spirituality, the adjective carries a direct association of depth.

Now we come to the final phrase that is outstanding in a poem of uninterrupted precision of imaginative language:

Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's
abyss.

An exceedingly moving expression is here, charged with a profound sweetness of pathos. The *r* common to "Arise" and "heart" and "yearning" make, in combination with prominent long vowels, the first half of the expression one whole of clear liquidity melodiously surging up: a sense of welling tears is exquisitely conveyed. The *s* common to "sobs" and "Nature's" and "abyss" makes, in combination with prominent short vowels, the second half one whole of halting sibilance like a repeated catch in the breath: a sense of deeply felt yet softly uttered distress is communicated. And the two halves are bound together by one *s* occurring in the first and one *r* in the second. The right rhythm bearing out the significance of the right words—there we have the double secret of this line in which a world-woe finds tongue, with an art equalling in its own way the art of Shakespeare's

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

and the art of Virgil's

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt,

which C. Day Lewis has Englished:

Tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by human
transience.

But Sri Aurobindo has a language of profounder implication. Apart from that implication which we have already dealt with when expounding the mystical metaphysics and psychology of the poem, there are one or two points about the effective interplay of the meaning of certain words. "Arise" becomes intense by contrast to "abyss": and what is asked to arise—the rapture-blushed Rose of Love—gets its intensity from "sobs"; a sob too arises, it is a sound that comes up from the heart's yearning, and now instead of it the God-Rose is asked to bring up its rapture-blush.

Everywhere in *Rose of God* we have a language that is not only profound but also life-packed, as language should be when it attempts the revelation of spiritual reality. It can be simple but with a direct stroke and not with an easy-going fluency, or it can be rich but with a density of semi-occult semi-physical vision and not with a loose decorativeness of intellectual or emotional stuff coupled with pleasing images. The spiritual style simple is in "outbreak of the Godhead in man". Just one word is enough to bring a beautiful energy from within, going straight to its goal without. It is also in "Beatitude's kiss". Here too one word gathers up all the piercing intimacy of Beatitude: a word like "touch" or even "clasp" would not give that intimacy. And, further, "kiss" is very appropriate because sobbing has been mentioned before it: the mouth is involved in both sobbing and kissing: life which is a sob of Nature becomes a

kiss of Supernature. The spiritual style rich is in phrases like “vermilion stain” and “Sun on the head of the Timeless”, which exert an audacious pictorial pressure on us.

We may close our survey by saying that each of the two sides in every stanza—the high above that is for ever and the down below that has to be—imposes its significances upon our spiritual sense not only by vivid words mystically visionary but also by an inner tone massively musical. That is why, at the very start, I have called the poem a climax of the incantatory art reached by mysticism.

“SWAN OF THE SUPREME AND SPACELESS ETHER...”

AN APPROACH THROUGH SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY TO A POETIC VISION

Have we here a contradiction in terms or a suprarational truth? What point is made by the words “spaceless ether”? Nineteenth-century physics accustomed us to the ether as a medium permeating space and transmitting electromagnetic waves. In the twentieth century, the Michelson-Morley experiment and Einstein’s relativity theory discredited the ether as a space-filling medium and left us with empty space. But this space, according to Einstein, is capable of structure and in that sense cannot be an insubstantial void and may be called “ether”. The poetic imagination down the ages has also identified ether and space and given the latter name to the clear sky, the upper regions beyond the clouds, spatial extension in its essential purity. In short, ether and space seem inseparable, whether we function as poets or physicists. Can we separate them simply by terming the ether “supreme”? Again, how is a “Swan” with its three-dimensional shape to be fitted into something that is “spaceless” or unextended? Can the non-extension accommodate it merely by being designated “supreme ether”? Poetry may have—as Coleridge phrases it—“a happy valiancy”, but is not this whole poetic expression of Sri Aurobindo’s an impossible violence?

I

Let us first get an idea of the class of “realities” to which the expression may refer. It occurs as a culminating symbol at the end of the poem, *Ascent*, an experiment, technically, in “free

quantitative verse with a predominant dactylic movement” and, inspirationally, in “Overhead poetry”. We shall leave the technical aspect aside. The poetry is of a type in which both the clear and the mysterious come on the breath of an incantation from a masterful height of realised spiritual consciousness. When the clear is achieved, then, unlike as in “the heritage of Symbolism,” the work of the post-Mallarmé poets like Valéry, Rilke and the later Yeats, the shades and shimmers of the Beyond are not caught into an intellectual *chiaroscuro* but what looks such is rather the art-pattern of some lucid-linguaged revelatory power other than the sharp-phrased interpretative intellect. A philosophical atmosphere is there, yet shot with a luminosity and wideness of significance exceeding thought. In *Ascent* it is this kind of atmosphere that meets us almost throughout, preparing the final paradoxical picture.

Sri Aurobindo begins with asking the “Spirit immortal” to soar

Away from the turning Wheel, breaking the magical Circle,
out of “the grey and the little”, “the cry and the struggle”, the known universe of ignorance and continual rebirth, as well as out of all supra-terrestrial domains where the soul may sojourn. The command is to press upward into “the Silence”, “the Alone and the Absolute”—and the adjuration runs:

Vast and immobile, formless and marvellous,
Higher than Heaven, wider than the universe,
In a pure glory of being,
In a bright stillness of self-seeing,
Communing with a boundlessness voiceless and intimate,
Make thy knowledge too high for thought, thy joy too deep
for emotion;

At rest in the unchanging Light, mute with the wordless
self-vision,
Spirit, pass out of thyself: Soul, escape from the clutch of
Nature.

But Sri Aurobindo does not stop here. He next calls on the
“Spirit immortal” to outgrow even the Alone and the Absolute.
He summons it:

Out from the Silence, out from the Silence,
Carrying with thee the ineffable Substance,
Carrying with thee the splendour and wideness,
Ascend, O Spirit immortal,
Assigning to Time its endless meaning,
Blissful enter into the clasp of the Timeless.
Awake in the living Eternal, taken to the bosom of love of the
Infinite...
Thy heart close to the heart of the Godhead for ever.

Thus there is a Supreme that embraces both time and time-
lessness, and in order to reach this Reality where the divine
secret of all temporal vicissitudes lies hidden—the secret of their
fulfilment rather than their annulment—the human aspirant is
told not only—

Soul, exceed life’s boundaries; Spirit, surpass the universe—
but also:

Outclimbing the summits of Nature,
Transcending and uplifting the soul of the finite,
Rise with the world in thy bosom,
O Word gathered into the heart of the Ineffable.

Nature is not abandoned: all her parts are retained in their essence within what Sri Aurobindo's spiritual metaphysics terms "the psychic being", the true inner individual, the deep dweller in man's "bosom", who has descended from the Transcendent, the Supreme, as a portion of that Eternity's and Infinity's Supernature, "the heart of the Ineffable", into the cosmic phenomenon and evolves there to consummate all the yearnings of the cosmos—the mind's search for total knowledge of subjective and objective events, the life-force's quest for endless happiness and irresistible power and unlimited conquest in Nature's realm, the physical form's seeking for stability and health and perpetual organic persistence within an ever-growing harmonious society. The true psyche represents the whole drive of earthly evolution. When it rises to the Supreme, there goes with it the entire universe's agelong ache for fulfilment in terms of mentality, vitality, corporeality, modes of an all-round spatio-temporal existence. Establishing a relationship of love between itself and the Supreme Godhead, it lays the basis for a return upon the Nature left behind, with the riches of a plenary Supernature, a divine mentality, a divine vitality, a divine corporeality. Alluding to that basis, Sri Aurobindo gives the injunction:

One with the Transcendent, calm, universal,
 Single and free, yet innumerably living,
 All in thyself and thyself in all dwelling,
 Act in the world with thy being beyond it.

Here we have an anticipation of the *grand finale* of the poem, where the Soul-Word of manifestation that has gone back to its source in the Ineffable to recover the all-transforming truth is told:

without being subjected to separation even in appearance as in this world of ours. Similarly, in the Eternal's infinity space and time are not agents of division as in our cosmos: they constitute an archetypal cosmicity. That is to say, the two lines we are considering do not yet figure the spatio-temporal phenomenal universe we know. We are still in the Beyond, but the Beyond as foundational to the Here. It is only in the Swan-line that we get a precise indication of this world of ours: "wandering winged through the universe." But that indication is not the entirety of the line: it is what follows by poetic logic and spiritual emergence from the first half of it. The first half embodies in a startling symbol the thought struck out in the concept of the archetypal cosmicity in the latter sections of the two preceding lines. With such a vision of its significance we are in a position to come to grips with the details of its apparently impossible violence.

For, what exactly do we mean by an archetypal cosmicity? Primarily, there are in it the perfect divine originals, models, counterparts, supporting truths of our world of matter, life, mind, soul. Nor are these truths mere static marvels locked up high above, allowing no more than transient reflections of themselves in the flux of phenomena, reflections that are fragmentary and inaccurate. What is high above is being slowly worked out here below: the phenomenal flux is evolutionary and through the aeons it evolves the archetypes. And the evolution takes place because on the one hand the archetypes press down from their lofty position where they are for ever manifest and on the other hand push up from their own involution in our world where they lie concealed. If they lacked this double presence and action, there would be a cleavage and shortcoming in existence: the Divine would not be everywhere in one shape or another and everything would not have a divine aim.

Secondly, the archetypes are what Sri Aurobindo calls Real-

Ideas, the creative movements not of Mind but of Supermind, the Truth-Consciousness. In our mental consciousness, “we regard thought as a thing separate from existence, abstract, unsubstantial, different from reality, something which appears one knows not whence and detaches itself from objective reality in order to observe, understand and judge it; for so it seems and therefore is to our all-dividing, all-analysing mentality. The first business of Mind is to render discrete, to make fissures much more than to discern, and so it has made this paralysing fissure between thought and reality. But in Supermind all being is consciousness, all consciousness is of being, and the idea, a pregnant vibration of consciousness, is equally a vibration of being pregnant of itself; it is an initial coming out, in creative self-knowledge, of that which lay concentrated in uncreative self-awareness. It comes out as the Idea that is a reality, and it is that reality of the Idea which evolves itself, always by its own power and consciousness of itself....”¹

Thirdly, the whole Supermind is within each Real-Idea, for all the Real-Ideas are the whole Supermind determining itself in various modes. Each Real-Idea is thus packed with all the infinite potentialities or possibilities of the Supermind yet having one particular potentiality or possibility brought forward for realised play. “Therefore all is in each as well as each in all. Therefore every seed of things implies in itself all the infinity of various possibilities, but is kept to one law of process and result by the Will, that is to say, by the Knowledge-Force of the Conscious-Being who is manifesting himself....”²

Fourthly, one Real-Idea does not clash with other Real-Ideas, for there is a single vast Consciousness which contains and relates all Real-Ideas in itself as its own movements.

¹ *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo Library, New York, 1949), p. 121.

² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

“Therefore, always, in all mutations and combinations, a self-existent and inalienable harmony.”¹

In the light of this fourfold character of the archetypal cosmicity we may probe further the question of space and time. All cosmicity argues relation of event to event, object to object: in other words; time and space. But, when all is in each and each in all and everything is held within one Consciousness variously disposed, time and space are only that Consciousness viewing itself in extension; and in this extension our past, present and future would be regarded in one view, all points and regions would be contained in a single survey. There would be an eternal present infinitely stretched out, an infinite expanse eternally indivisible—and both would be a fact of Spiritual Being. Again, inasmuch as the Consciousness of Supermind is a cosmic vision which is all-comprehensive, all-pervading, all-inhabiting and upholds by its immutable unity the variation of its self-deployment it exceeds the successions of time and the divisions of space: it is in that respect timeless and spaceless. Yet this is not a pure unitarian Consciousness, in which Spiritual Being does not cast itself out into any kind of self-extension and, if it contains cosmos at all, contains it in potentiality, not in actuality—in an implicit rather than an explicit form. The sheer timelessness and spacelessness of such a Consciousness are different from the Supermind’s transcendence of time’s successions and space’s divisions. The latter is what we may call unsuccessive time and undivided space. The former’s high concentration of unity in unextended Being is translated here into extended Being in which there is an equality of oneness: Supermind pervades its extension as One, inhabits as One the multiplicities of its cosmos, it is everywhere at once and single and equal. Space-time here reflects and represents the spaceless and timeless. By the very nature of Supermind’s intimate relation with

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

the absolute Unity where all lies latent it is just such a paradox as we encounter in that Swan-line of Sri Aurobindo's. And just by this paradoxicality Supermind stands as the parent of our space-time universe and secretly governs it.

2

We now begin to see the appropriateness of the several components of Sri Aurobindo's phrase. Taking space and ether to be inseparable we asked whether we could separate them and render the latter "spaceless" with the help of the additional adjective "supreme". The answer is Yes. Unless the space or ether concerned is of the kind we have considered, unless it is supramental and therefore "supreme", it cannot reflect and represent spacelessness to make the equable extension of the One, in which multiplicity is not divided. The very noun "ether" occurs in the ancient spiritual tradition of India in companionship with the adjective "supreme" to denote such an extension. In the Rigveda, I, 164, 39, Rishi Dirghatama speaks of the Vedic hymns as "existing in a supreme ether, imperishable and immutable, in which all the gods are seated". The Rigveda, V, 15, 2, further says: "By the Truth they hold the Truth that holds all, in the power of the Sacrifice, in the supreme ether." The reference to the sitting of all the gods joins up with our question whether a three-dimensional shape like the "Swan" could be accommodated in spacelessness by the latter being designated "supreme ether". The answer, again, is Yes, for the same reason: we can understand the bird's three-dimensionality as being precisely of that equable extension which is space at once stretched-out and undivided. The Katha Upanishad, V, 2, having this space-ether in mind, makes room there for even our Swan by name: "The Swan that settles in the purity...born of the Truth—itself the Truth, the Vast." The

ever-free Spiritual Being, the unsullied Soul, the inmost Perfection which is the source and the goal of all phenomenal existence is, of course, what Sri Aurobindo, following ancient Indian symbolism, calls “Swan”—and it is a most appropriate description not only because of the beauty and purity it conjures up but also because the white wonder is an organism, a living unity in which the numerous parts are no aggregate but diversifications of the unity: a single life-power pervasive of all its parts by multiplying itself and becoming them is here. In organic unity as distinguished from mechanical collectivity we have a suggestive approximation to the oneness-in-manyness of the Divine—and in the dazzling loveliness of the Swan-image we have this Divine’s perfection approximately suggested.

On the collocation “spaceless ether”, which is the core of the Aurobindonian phrase’s paradoxicality, we can obtain a direct verbal gloss by culling some passages from Sri Aurobindo’s own books.

Harking back to Upanishadic utterances he writes: “‘Brahman is in all things, all things are in Brahman, all things are Brahman’, is the triple formula of the comprehensive Supermind, a single truth of self-manifestation in three aspects which it holds together and inseparably in its self-view as the fundamental knowledge from which it proceeds to the play of the cosmos.”¹ The triple formula is stated in our poem itself, with the third limb put first:

Single and free, yet innumerably living,
All in thyself and thyself in all dwelling...

And the same formula is dealt with at some length when Sri Aurobindo explains: “For integral self-possession we must be not only one with the Self, with God, but with all existences. We must take back in the right relation and in the poise of an

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

eternal Truth the world of our manifested existence peopled by our fellow-beings from which we had drawn back because we were bound to them in a wrong relation and in the poise of a falsehood created in Time by the principle of divided consciousness with all its oppositions, discords and dualities... In other words, besides the consciousness of the transcendent Self... we have to accept and become the cosmic consciousness....”¹ “This realisation of all things as God or Brahman has, as we have seen, three aspects.... First, there is the Self in whom all beings exist. The Spirit, the Divine has manifested itself as infinite self-extended being, self-existent, pure, not subject to Time and Space, but supporting Time and Space as figures of its consciousness. It is more than all things and contains them all within that self-extended being and consciousness, not bound by anything it creates, holds or becomes, but free and infinite and all-blissful. It holds them, in the old image, as the infinite ether contains in itself all objects. This image of the ethereal (Akasha) Brahman may indeed be of great practical help to the sadhak who finds a difficulty in meditating on what seems to him at first an abstract and unseizable idea. In the image of the ether, not physical but an encompassing ether of vast being, consciousness and bliss, he may seem to see with the mind and to feel in his mental being this supreme existence and to identify it in oneness with the self within him. By such meditation the mind may be brought to a favourable state of predisposition in which, by the rending or withdrawing of the veil, the supramental vision may flood the mentality and change entirely all our seeing. And upon that change of seeing, as it becomes more and more potent and insistent and occupies all our consciousness, there will supervene a change of becoming so that what we see we become. We shall be in our self-consciousness not so much cosmic as ultra-cosmic, infinite. Mind

¹ *On Yoga, I: The Synthesis of Yoga*, pp. 421-22.

and life and body will then be only movements in that infinity which we have become, and we shall see that what exists is not world at all but simply this infinity of spirit in which move the mighty cosmic harmonies of its own images of self-conscious becoming.”¹

Sri Aurobindo carries the ether-metaphor on to the second aspect also of the triple Vedantic formula. Asking whether the existences that make up the cosmic harmonies are only images, empty of any informing reality, within the all-containing Self, he answers: “Not so.... As the ether both contains and is as it were contained in the jar, so this Self both contains and inhabits all existences, not in a physical but in a spiritual sense, and is their reality. This indwelling state of the Self we have to realise; we have to see and ourselves to become in our consciousness the Self in all existences.”²

To complete his exposition, Sri Aurobindo continues: “This Self that we are has finally to become to our self-consciousness entirely one with all existences in spite of its exceeding them. We have to see it not only as that which contains and inhabits all but that which is all, not only as indwelling spirit but also as the name and form, the movement and the master of the movement, the mind and life and body.... The individual mind, life and body which we recoiled from as not our true being, we shall recover as a true becoming of the Self, but no longer in a purely individual narrowness.... We shall come to feel all the consciousness of the physical world as one with our physical consciousness, feel all the energies of the cosmic life around us as our own energies, feel all the heart-beats of the great cosmic impulse and seeking in our heart-beats set to the rhythm of the divine Ananda, feel all the action of the universal mind flowing into our mentality and our thought-action flowing out upon it as a wave into that wide sea. This unity embracing

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 423-24.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 424-25.

all mind, life and matter in the light of a supramental Truth and the pulse of a spiritual Bliss will be to us our internal fulfilment of the Divine in a complete cosmic consciousness.”¹

Our approach through spiritual philosophy to Sri Aurobindo’s poetic vision is now complete. As “Overhead poetry” is at work here, the canons of the ordinary poetic imagination, no less than those of theoretical physics, are surpassed. There is really no contradiction in terms.

3

We may end by a few comments on the sheer poetry of our line. The dominant sound-effect is of *s* and *w*, with an under-current of *n*. A sweep of sibilance asserts some poise of high-breathing power that is sovereign. The *w*-alliteration has an active widening influence, as if setting this power free in open expanses. And we may mark how the very initial word “Swan” includes the *w*-influence potentially, as it were, and how the very last word “universe” echoes the initial note of sibilance. There is a significant rounded harmony. And both these words carry the *n*-ring which becomes emphatic in “wandering winged”. The present participle “wandering” is irreplaceable by anything synonymous, just as another form of the same vocable is the inevitable touch in Milton’s

Those thoughts that wander through Eternity.

Not only a plunging puissance but also a sense of freedom in all directions is conveyed by this vocable. Further, its opening syllable—“wan”—chimes most suggestively with the same sound in “Swan”, so that the act of wandering proceeds, so to speak, from the very nature of the bird. Neither “travelling”

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 425-26.

nor “voyaging” nor “journeying” would have this aptness. They would fail also to alliterate with “winged”. The alliteration is of capital importance to clinch the connection between the ideas behind the two words. Besides, the *n*-resonance with its haunting thrill would fail to go home so definitively from those substitutes. Again, “winged” cannot give way to another word in order to suit such synonyms. For it is absolutely essential if the poet is to indicate the loosening forth of the Swan’s transcendent power into a cosmos-covering mastery.

All in all, a perfect verbalising and rhythming out of the meaning in a varied manner is present, and the great length of the line as compared with the rest of the poem drives deep into us the ultimate magnitude of the spiritual achievement the whole piece pictures.

If any poetic phrase in world-literature comes up to the blend of literary surprise and satisfaction we have here, it is the fourth line of the first stanza in Mallarmé’s sonnet *Le Cygne* (*The Swan*):

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui
 Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d’aile ivre
 Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
 Le transparent glacier des vols qui n’ont pas fui!

We may English the stanza:

Virginal, vivid, beautiful Today—
 Will it tear with a stroke of drunken wing this lone
 Hard lake where haunts mid hoar-frost’s overlay
 The transparent glacier of flights unflown?

Sri Aurobindo himself has picked out the fourth line for special praise and called it “magnificent”, and he has commented:

“This idea of the denied flights (imprisoned powers) of the soul that have frozen into a glacier seems to me as powerful as it is violent.”¹ On being told of the usual interpretation of the poem in terms of Mallarmé’s poetic situation, Sri Aurobindo has said: “The swan is to my understanding not merely the poet who has not sung in the higher spaces of the consciousness, which is already a fine idea, but the soul that has not risen there and found its higher expression, the poet, if Mallarmé thought of that specially, being only a signal instance of this spiritual frustration. There can be no more powerful, moving and formidable expression of this spiritual frustration, this chilled and sterile greatness, than the image of the frozen lake and the imprisoned swan as developed by Mallarmé.”²

In view of this gloss, Mallarmé’s phrase makes a very pertinent juxtaposition with Sri Aurobindo’s. Poetically it matches it: philosophically it polarises it with an equally expressive audacity. For, the Aurobindonian bird comes forth as a symbol antithetical to the Mallarméan. It is the Soul completely triumphant instead of being splendidly defeated. In the world-wandering yet world-exceeding Swan we get the all-consummating counterpart to the French poet’s ice-bound *Cygne* of flights unflown.

¹ *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo* by Nirodbaran, Second Series (Pondicherry, 1959), p. 194.

² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

TWO ILLUMINATIONS FROM *ILION*

A great poem illuminates many areas of art and life, provides insight into a number of technical problems and psychologico-cultural issues. I may bring forward two instances of such help from Sri Aurobindo's *Ilion*. Both have nothing quite directly to do with the central subject-matter or the poetic working out of it; but they are highly relevant to the field of poetry in general and to certain confrontations of self and world emerging today.

I

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATING HOMER

Sri Aurobindo has framed a theory of what he calls true quantitative verse in English and amply illustrated it with nearly 5000 lines unravelling the greatest knot of the difficulty: the hexameter. His theory, which he designates "realistic", can be summed up in its whole base with four rules or sets of rules:¹

"(I) All stressed syllables are metrically long, as are also all long-vowel syllables even without stress.

"All short-vowel syllables are metrically short, unless they are lengthened by stress—or else by a sufficient weight of consonants or some other lengthening sound-element; but the mere fact of more than one consonant coming after a short vowel, whether within the word or after it, or both in combination, is not sufficient to confer length upon the syllable. Heaviness caused by a crowding of consonants affects the rhythm of a line or part of a line but does not alter its metrical values.

¹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, "On Quantitative Metre", pp. 340-41.

“Each word has its own metrical value which cannot be radically influenced or altered by the word that follows.

“(2) The English language has many sounds which are doubtful or variable in quantity; these may be sometimes used as short and sometimes as long according to circumstance. Here the ear must be the judge.

“(3) Quantity within the syllable itself is not so rigidly fixed as in the ancient languages; often position or other circumstances may alter the metrical value of a syllable. A certain latitude has to be conceded in such cases, and there again the ear must be the judge.

“(4) Quantity metres cannot be as rigid and unalterable in English as in the old classical tongues; for the movement of the language is pliant and flexible and averse to rigidity and monotone. English poetry has always a fundamental metrical basis, a fixed normality of the feet constituting a line; but it relieves the fixity by the use of modulations substituting, with sometimes a less, sometimes a greater freedom, other feet for the normal. This rule of variation, very occasionally admitted in the classical tongues but natural in English poetry, must be applied or at least permitted in quantitative metres also; otherwise, in poems of some length, their rhythms may become stereotyped in a too rigid sameness and fatigue the ear.

“No other rule than these four need be laid down, for the rest must be left to individual choice and skill in technique.”

With the advent of the Aurobindonian hexameter in tune with the genius of English as well as catching the temper of the classical medium, the vexed question of translating Homer into truly responsive English verse has received at last an answer. Interestingly enough, in his early days Sri Aurobindo himself attempted a set translation of the *Odyssey*.¹ But he did not carry on and what remains is only a few opening passages, and these

¹ *More Poems* (Pondicherry, 1957), pp. 49-50.

the lengthy labour of varied journeying undergone by a particular individual noted for certain qualities. But in two places the indication is brought to a significant head, as it were. While “Sing to me” and “Muse of the” and “counselled who” are each a dactyl (long-short-short), the third foot—“man many”—is, by Sri Aurobindo’s system, an anti-bacchius (long-long-short) in which quantitative length is created purely by stress-strokes: it metrically dwells on the hero’s multi-aspected competence of mind, packs home his weight of wisdom and subtly suggests his fitness for what he was made to do. Again, what he was made to do is rendered equally living by a special effect in the fifth foot—“far through the”—which balances the third by immediately coming on the heels of the whole phrase dealing with the man concerned. This also is an anti-bacchius but mainly by an intrinsic quantitative stretch-out and it climaxes the suggestion of the sustained movement across space and time by the hero. The line’s sixth foot—“world’s ways”—is an emphatic spondee, a couple of syllables not only having a long or lengthened vowel but also bearing stresses and conjuring up with a culminating precision a sense both of the wide persistent travel and of the deep diverse travail. Here we may note in addition the alliterative *w*’s and proceed to mark the picking up of the alliteration by the opening word of the next line: “Wandering.” Not merely is the idea of continual going hither and thither upon land and sea enforced: a sound-support is given to the significance by the triple repetition of the letter *w* which has a certain expansive effect well-known to the sensitive poetic ear, as in Wordsworth’s

the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,

and Sri Aurobindo’s

In the wide workshop of the wonderful world.

The line starting with “Wandering” links up rhythmically with its predecessor through a single anti-bacchius once more—“tossed after”—as well as by a dactyl (“Troia he”) in the third foot. But the initial foot (“Wandering was”) is a first-paeon (long-short-short-short) which, coming immediately after the preceding line’s anti-bacchius and spondee, adds another shade to the motif of travel and travail—a movement with a pressure plunging as if into thin air again and again. The second line closes with three dissyllables—the first a natural trochee, the second a spondee by an accent-shift to the first syllable such as English scansion practises with some words and by an intrinsically long accent-deprived second syllable, the third foot a spondee yet a little different from the one before it no less than from the terminal of the opening line, being stressed only in the first of its two intrinsically long components: “sàcked the / dīvine / strōnghōld.” Nor is this trio of dissyllables a mere variation: it meaningfully covers the mention of the past magnitude of the city Odysseus left in ruins before he started tossing to and fro. The rhythmic pace is slowed down and at the end brought to a standstill with the very word connoting the original firm-foundedness of Troia which had been built by Apollo’s art. Quite a host of expressive effects are set together, interacting among themselves within a billowy sweep and swirl whose changing rhythms, for all their separate roles, are basically harmonious as in Homer’s original.

Unaware of the right mould found by Sri Aurobindo, a writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* (March 8, 1963) wrote in a front-page article¹ apropos of translating Homer: “There is no equivalent between a metrical six-foot line [*i.e.* the quantitative hexameter] and one dependent on stress, but the tech-

¹ “The Masks of Homer”, col. 3.

nique developed by Mr. Day Lewis and Professor Lattimore has proved more successful than most....” Now, to have a true measure of the claimed success we have only to take the reviewer’s quotation of Lattimore’s rendering of the first line of Homer’s famous passage in the *Iliad* about the descent of Apollo to avenge the Greeks’ insult to his high-priest Chryses:

Bē de kat’ oulumpoīo karēnōn chōōmenos ker.

Lattimore writes:

And strode down along the pinnacles of Olympos, angered
in his heart...

Sri Aurobindo, in the course of discussing certain Homeric habits—stock descriptions, epithets always reiterated, lines even which are constantly repeated again and again when the same incident returns in the narrative—happens to quote the very phrase and to English it:

Down from the peaks of Olympus he came wrath vexing
his heart-strings.

Sri Aurobindo has sacrificed strict literalness at the end but the fundamental Homeric spirit and sound are there—and perhaps all the more by that extra poetic touch to match the Greek splendour of word. In Lattimore we feel a smothering of the needed qualities. Day Lewis has not tried his hand at Homer, but we have his very readable Virgil, with some excellent responses in places yet lacking the sense of the right body to make such responses organic to the inspiration. We may test him in one of Virgil’s most memorable moments, which Sri Aurobindo too has translated in passing, while helping a disciple

in the art of the caesura. Virgil, in the midst of describing a storm and the wreck of the ships of Aeneas, breaks into a line of universal appeal, the soul of all humanity speaking poignantly and profoundly:

O passi graviora! dabit deus his quoque finem.

Lewis gets something of the poignancy but it is not verbally subtle enough or rhythmically keen enough to cut down into profundity:

Worse than this you have suffered. God will end all this too.¹

Listen now to Sri Aurobindo:

Fiercer griefs you have suffered; to these too God will give
ending.

The world-cry is here in its full resonance. No doubt, a greater poetic voice is in action, but it secures the supreme Virgilian fulfilment by finding for the Latin verse's absolute inevitability the right metrical mould in English.

Wherever Lewis strikes upon that mould by poetic instinct he brings off the right hexametrical note, as in rendering Virgil's

Prospexi Italiam summa sublimis ab unda

by

Caught sight of Italy, being lifted high on a wave crest.²

¹ *The Aeneid of Virgil*, translated from the Latin by C. Day Lewis (The New English Library Ltd., London, 1962), p. 6, line 199.

² *Ibid.*, p. 129. line 357.

There we have in the initial anti-bacchius a natural Aurobindonian modulation which would be absent from the common English imitation of Virgil's form or would have to be artificially passed off as a dactyl. Much more of this success would have been present if Lewis had been aware of the correct technical requirements.

What is true about Lewis's metre applies also to the line chosen by Kimon Friar in his translation of Nikos Kazantzakis's Greek epic, *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*. In Friar's view, this line of six stresses on a predominantly iambic base best corresponds in English to the original of seventeen syllables and eight iambic beats.¹ Friar is correct; but that original has served Kazantzakis as well to render Homer's poems, into modern Greek.² So, in face of the proverbial difficulty of Englishing the Homeric hexameter, Friar may be assumed to believe that his English equivalent of Kazantzakis's own composition would suit an English version of Homer. There is no denying that Friar has produced remarkable effects again and again in his translation; yet what communicates Kazantzakis cannot be said to communicate Homer from the technical and rhythmical point of view. And the skilful modulations Friar plays on his alexandrine blank verse show up the unsuitableness of the fundamental line for Homer by juxtaposing it with approximations to Homer's tone itself. Here is a passage from Book 1:³

A mild breeze blew on ringlets of a yellow brow,
 somewhere amid an olive tree a nightbird sighed,
 soft seawaves far away in the smooth shingles murmured
 and happy night in her first sleep mumbled in dream.
 Telemachus then turned to his harsh-speaking lord:

¹ *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* by Nicos Kazantzakis, translated into English Verse, Synopsis and Notes by Kimon Friar (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1958), p. xxvii. ² *Ibid.* ³ *Ibid.*, p. 6, lines 153-61.

“Father, your eyes are brimmed with blood, your fists are
smoking!”

The cruel man-slayer grabbed his son and roared with
laughter:

two crows on two black branches shook with fright, and fled,
and in the court an old oak swayed with all its stars.

Immediately we can pick out four lines as Homeric in movement, the second and third of them completely so, the first and fourth just wanting one foot at the end, and all of them are unconsciously Aurobindonian quantitative hexameters with their many kinds of legitimised variations:

soft sea | waves far a | way on the | smooth shingles |
murmured...

“Father, your | eyes are | brimmed with | blood, your |
fists are | smoking |”

The cruel | man-slayer | grabbed his | son and | roared with |
laughter:

two crows on | two black | branches | shook with | fright, and
fled...

The one writer who in the past has come nearest to the hexameter of Homer or Virgil in English is not Friar or Lewis or Lattimore: it is H. B. Cotterill. In 1911 he published his translation of the *Odyssey*.¹ Rejecting academic attempts to

¹ *Homer's Odyssey, A Line-for-line Translation in the Metre of the Original* by H. B. Cotterill (London, George G. Harrap & Co.), 1911.

construct the Homeric or Virgilian line on the principles of Classical quantity without attention to the natural English stress, he accepts the accentual hexameter as practised by Southey, Lockhart, Longfellow, Kingsley and Clough but adds¹: “most unfortunately, many of the advocates of the ‘accentual’ against the ‘quantitative hexameter’...have made a fatal mistake in maintaining that quantity (length, weight) does not exist at all in English, or, if it does, that it is a *quantité négligeable*. Anyhow, my ear has become ever more and more impatient of the ordinary English hexameter with its disregard of quantity—the beauty and vigour of a line seeming to me to depend mainly on the coincidence of quantity and accent, and on the use of true spondees and dactyls.” These are wise words but not sufficiently so, for it would be hardly possible to maintain for any desirable length a coincidence of quantity and accent. Cotterill himself strikes a compromise when he comes to tabulate his rules. For, he² wants his accents to fall either on long syllables or on those “weighted with meaning when somewhat short in pronunciation” and his “slacks” or unaccented syllables to be either short or “light, unemphatic... and never (even if short in pronunciation) any monosyllable or dissyllable that makes one pause to think such as a verb, a noun, or an adjective”. Face to face with these rules, we shall have to make-do often enough not only with intrinsic shorts in place of the old longs but also with intrinsic longs in place of the old shorts. The principles of quantity grow rather a hotchpotch in this scheme: consistency and order could come only if the accented shorts and the unaccented longs are put on a parity with the accented longs as metrical elements and as foot-builders. Of course, how and when this or that element is to be employed would rest with the inspired ear. But to leave any of these three out would be

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-iv. ² *Ibid.*, pp. xv-vi.

to falsify the truth of the hexametrical spirit. And then the insistence on mere dactyls and spondees would scarcely continue. Other feet would automatically be formed. And, all in all, we would arrive at the Aurobindonian vision. Partly because of an incomplete and arbitrary scheme and partly because the afflatus was not as intense as Sri Aurobindo's, Cotterill's counterpart¹ to the opening of the *Odyssey* we have culled from Sri Aurobindo, though a good composition on the whole by unconsciously approximating in its form to some of the technical insights of Sri Aurobindo, misses yet the genuine Homeric "how" of expression, except for line 4:

Sing, O Muse, of the man so weary and wise, who in far lands
Wandered whenas he had wasted the sacred town of the
Trojans.

Many a people he saw and beheld their cities and customs,
Many a woe he endured in his heart as he tossed on the ocean,
Striving to win him his life and to bring home safely his
comrades.

Ah but he rescued them not, those comrades, much as he
wished it.

Ruined by their own act of infatuate madness they perished,
Fools that they were—who the cows of the sun-god, lord
Hyperion,
Slaughtered and ate; and he took from the men their day of
returning.

Sing—whence-ever the lay—sing, Zeus-born goddess for
us too!

It would seem that today the most promising voice is of an American disciple of Sri Aurobindo: Jesse Roarke. He has a translation of the entire *Iliad* waiting for an imaginative publi-

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

sher. Some passages have seen the light in the pages of *Mother India*.¹ Quite a few of their quantitative units may take some time to go home to the ear accustomed to Sri Aurobindo's handling of the form; but that would be due mostly to Roarke's more frequent use of the trochee (commonly substituting the Greek spondee) as compared to the predominance of the dactyl or other trisyllabic feet in Sri Aurobindo. It is a question whether this divergence is not somewhat of a hindrance at times to the largeness of utterance we expect from the Homeric movement; but the inspiration in the published passage is sufficiently strong to leap over the hitches of technique if any—and scholars still differ as to the technical importance of the spondee in Homer, though the greater occurrence of the dactyl on the whole is rarely in doubt. Anyway, future poets are free to follow their own instinct and ear in the wake of Sri Aurobindo's pioneering achievement on a grand scale, which sets the broad norm. We may quote one telling effect as a token from Roarke's rendering of the famous account of Priam's visit to Achilles to recover the body of Hector:

Then the voice of Priam spoke and was raised in entreaty:
"O Achilles, like to the gods, remember your father,
Whose years are even as mine, on the grievous tread of his
old age;
Haply now the dwellers about are treating him badly,
Harming him, now there is none for his shield from ruin and
evil.

Yet whenever he hears of you and knows you are living.
Then he has joy in his breast and day by day he is hopeful,
Waiting to see his own dear son returned from the Troad;
Yet myself am bereft entirely, I who begot sons
Best in Troy's broad land, and see not one who is left me...

¹ October, 1969, pp. 628-30.

Have due thought of the gods, Achilles, and show me compas-
 sion,
 Your father bear in your heart; for I am more to be pitied
 Even than he, who am suffering what none has suffered on
 earth—to
 Lift my hand to the face of the man who has slaughtered my
 own son.”

2

DIONYSIAN AND APOLLONIAN

Dionysian and Apollonian have been a fashionable antithesis, following upon Nietzsche's use of the terms. After Nietzsche they are always opposed roughly as Romanticism and Classicism, instinct and reason, natural state and civilisation, myth and rationalism, music and the plastic arts, the dithyrambic and the reflective as exemplified in the chorus and the dialogue respectively of a Greek tragedy.¹ Recently the antithesis *à la* Nietzsche has come into special literary prominence in connection with the life-vision and soul-attitude of Nikos Kazantzakis. In an excellent exposition of Kazantzakis's synthesis of the two in what that great Greek poet calls “the Cretan Glance”, we find Kimon Friar speaking of “the Apollonian or classical ordered vision of life” in one place and of “the eye of Hellenic Greece (or Apollo)” in another.²

Sri Aurobindo's *Ilion*, which time and again brings in the Gods of Greece, throws, in passing, a shaft of new light on the real meaning of the contrasted concepts. We may prepare our vision of this shaft by noting some remarks of Sri Aurobindo's apropos of the pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus. Sri Aurobindo

¹ *Dictionary of World Literature*, edited by Joseph T. Shipley (New York, 1942), p. 40, col. 2. ² *Op. cit.*, p. xix.

puts a stress on a period of Mystics preceding that of the philosophers and takes up the issue often discussed: Was Heraclitus a mystic or a rationalist? Sri Aurobindo agrees that Pfeleiderer's view of Heraclitus as a pure mystic is exaggerated, but he discerns a certain truth behind this misconception. He¹ opines: "Heraclitus' abuse of the Mysteries of his time is not very conclusive in this respect; for what he reviles is those aspects of obscure magic, physical ecstasy, sensual excitement which the Mysteries had put on in some at least of their final developments as the process of degeneration increased which made a century later even the Eleusinian a butt for the dangerous mockeries of Alcibiades and his companions. His complaint is that the secret rites which the populace held in ignorant and superstitious reverence 'unholily mysticise what are held among men as mysteries'. He rebels against the darkness of the Dionysian ecstasy in the approach to the secrets of Nature; but there is a luminous Apollonian as well as an obscure and sometimes dangerous Dionysian mysticism, a Dakshina as well as a Vama Marga of the mystic Tantra. And though no partaker in or supporter of any kind of rites or mummary, Heraclitus still strikes one as at least an intellectual child of the Mystics and of mysticism, although perhaps a rebel son in the house of his mother. He has something of the mystic style, something of the intuitive Apollonian inlook into the secrets of existence."

We may pause over the expressions: "a luminous Apollonian...mysticism", "the intuitive Apollonian inlook". Surely, in Sri Aurobindo's eyes, "Apollonian" cannot be equated with "the classical ordered vision of life". The post-Nietzschean usage must appear to him as mixing up the light of reason and reflection with a supra-intellectual and intuitive luminosity. And, when we turn to his poetry, the two Greek powers mixed

¹ *Heraclitus* (Calcutta, 1947), pp. 3-4.

up emerge distinctly. They are Athene and Apollo. Apollo, God of the Sun, Leader of the Muses, Inspirer of Poetry, Lord of the Delphic Oracle, cannot be the voice of Reason. Thinker also he could be, as we gather from some lines in *Ilion*,¹ but it is with a seer-thought that he comes, as these very lines attest:

Miracled, haloed,
Seer and magician and prophet who beholds what the thought
cannot witness,
Lifting the godhead within us to more than a human
endeavour,
Slayer and saviour, thinker and mystic, leaped from his sun-
peaks
Guarding in Ilion the wall of his mysteries Delphic Apollo.

Athene, not Apollo, is the clear and tempered light of the thinking mind, though still not without the breath of inspiration that always works when this mind is not all on its own but knows a *rapport* with a greater illumination, the intuitive Truth-Consciousness beyond the intellect. Not Apollo, but Athene is the divinity of mental Wisdom. Even as far back as the drama *Perseus the Deliverer*² of Sri Aurobindo's Baroda days we have those lines on Athene:

A noble centre of a people's worship,
To Zeus and great Athene build a temple
Between your sky-topped hills and Ocean's vasts:
Her might shall guard your lives and save your land.
In your human image of her deity
A light of reason and calm celestial force
And a wise tranquil government of life,

¹ Pp. 4-5. ² *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. 1, p. 305.

Order and beauty and harmonious thoughts
And, ruling the waves of impulse, high-throned will
Incorporate in marble, the carved and white
Ideal of a young uplifted race.
For these are her gifts to those who worship her.

Here we have Classical Greece hit off to a nicety. But the typical spirit of the Greece of Pericles and Phidias and Sophocles—"the inspired reason and the enlightened and chastened aesthetic sense", as Sri Aurobindo's *Future Poetry*¹ has it—is developed not only when a crude vitalism is overpassed: it is developed also when a mighty supra-intellectualism is left behind. This latter aspect is shown magnificently in "The Book of the Gods" in *Ilion*.

Zeus summons all the Gods to assembly and declares the divine will that Troy should perish and be razed to the ground, however heart-rending the event may prove to many of the deities, for only by the perishing of one culture and the arising of another can man progress: the hour is ripe now for the advent of the rule of Reason and there must be for its sake the subdual of three powers—Aphrodite, Ares and Apollo. After addressing several of the Gods, far-seeing Zeus says to “the brilliant offspring born of his musings”:²

“What shall I say to the thought that is calm in thy breasts,
O Athene?
Have I not given thee earth for thy portion, throned thee
and armoured,
Darkened Cypris’ smile, dimmed Hera’s son and Latona’s?
Swift in thy silent ambition, proud of thy radiant sternness,
Girl, thou shalt rule with the Greek and the Saxon, the
Frank and the Roman.

¹ P. 63. ² *Ilion*, p. 119.

All I foresee I approve; for I know what is willed, O Cronion.
Yet is the fierce strength wroth in my breast at the need of
approval

And for the human race fierce pity works in my bosom;
Wroth is my splendid heart with the cowering knowledge of
mortals,

Wroth are my burning eyes with the purblind vision of reason.
I will go forth from your seats and descend to the night
among mortals

There to guard the flame and the mystery; vast in my
moments

Rare and sublime to sound like a sea against Time and its
limits,

Cry like a spirit in pain in the hearts of the priest and the poet,
Cry against limits set and disorder sanities bounded.

Jealous for truth to the end my might shall prevail and for ever
Shatter the moulds that men make to imprison their limitless
spirits.

Dire, overpowering the brain I shall speak out my oracles
splendid.

Then in their ages of barren light or lucidity fruitful

Whenso the clear gods think they have conquered earth
and its mortals,

Hidden God from all eyes, they shall wake from their
dream and recoiling

Still they shall find in their paths the fallen and darkened
Apollo."

Apollonian and Dionysian are really the two poles of a single phenomenon—an illuminating force stronger than the intellect's, a direct intuition supra-rational in the one and infra-rational in the other. The latter is inferior in quality, but both are necessary if the "numinous" is to become established in embodied life: the Dionysian is the support of the Apollonian,

most adequate reading would be wholly in terms of such insight: the Apollonian self-knowledge was to be won by a burst of inner light on the receptive mind—it would be part of a process such as Sri Aurobindo¹ has described, with a pointer at the Delphic priestess, in the course of a long passage on the workings of the goddess Inspiration:

The inspiring goddess entered a mortal's breast,
Made there her study of divining thought
And sanctuary of prophetic speech
And sat upon the tripod seat of mind:
All was made wide above, all lit below.

As for the Apollonian moderation, to see it correctly we must understand the religious cosmic perception from which the maxim about it took birth. Sri Aurobindo² has formulated this perception very effectively:

“...there is something subtle, inscrutable and formidable that meets us in our paths, a Force of which the ancient Greeks took much notice, a Power that is on the watch for man in his effort at enlargement, possession and enjoyments and seems hostile and opposite. The Greeks figured it as the jealousy of the gods or as Doom, Necessity, Ate. The egoistic force in man may proceed far in its victory and triumph, but it has to be wary or it will find this power there on the watch for any flaw in his strength or action, any sufficient opportunity for his defeat and downfall. It dogs his endeavour with obstacle and reverse and takes advantage of his imperfections, often dallying with him, giving him a long rope, delaying and abiding its time,—and not only of his moral shortcomings

¹ *Savitri*, Book One Canto One, p. 48.

² “Mind, Nature and Law of Karma”, *The Problem of Rebirth* (Pondicherry 1952), p. 168.

but of his errors of will and intelligence, his excesses and deficiencies of strength and prudence, all defects of his nature. It seems overcome by his energies of Tapasya, but it waits its season. It overshadows unbroken or extreme prosperity and often surprises it with a sudden turn to ruin. It induces a security, a self-forgetfulness, a pride and insolence of success and victory and leads on its victim to dash himself against the hidden seat of justice or the wall of an invisible measure. It is as fatal to a blind self-righteousness and the arrogations of an egoistic virtue as to vicious excess and selfish violence. It appears to demand of man and of individual men and nations that they shall keep within a limit and a measure, while all beyond that brings danger; and therefore the Greeks held moderation in all things to be the greatest part of virtue."

Sri Aurobindo¹ explains further: "This is really a resistance of the Infinite acting through life against the claim of the imperfect ego of man to enlarge itself, possess, enjoy and have, while remaining imperfect, a perfect and enduring happiness and complete felicity of its world-experience."

So we may say that the *meden agan* of the Delphic temple is simply a decree against human egoism, against the aggrandisement of imperfect manhood: it emphasises the necessity of checking the littleness of man from straining towards greatness without first purifying the selfish motive in him. It is no mere reasonable doctrine of the golden mean: it takes account of secret cosmic forces, the mysterious gods. And it can be seen as directed actually against a Dionysian upsurge in mental man to drown his supra-intellectual possibilities: what is to be restrained is the desire revelling in a magnification of the crude stuff of our being which needs *katharsis*, purgation, and which on its own would blur our intellectual nature and prevent this nature's opening to the sun of truth-knowledge, the Apollonian

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

lustre revealing the god-self in us that has to be known.

Possibly the maxim of moderation taught in part that even the fiery inspiration from above the intellect was not safe outside a certain measure for the unregenerate human and also that a bit of the Dionysian was required to save one from an excess of the Apollonian. That may be why it was reported that for three months in the year Apollo allowed Dionysus to work in his temple. Further, remembering that the supra-intellectual and the infra-intellectual are pole and pole of a single phenomenon of intuition we may guess a frequent if not constant contact between Apollo and Dionysus: a sign of it may be discerned in the physical disposition of the priestess during her oracular moments, the poise over a cavern, the breathing of fumes from below. Has not Sri Aurobindo himself once pictured Apollo as seated brooding in Nature's caverns and hearkening to her underground murmur and do we not have in his lines about the sanctuary of prophetic speech and the tripod seat of mind a reference to the mystic result in a double-directioned phrase:

All was made wide above, all lit below?

However, considered in regard to origins and fundamentals, *meden agan* as well as *gnothi seauton* may be linked to Apollo's supra-intellectual purpose. Neither of them proves the Apollonian to be the pure intellect.

Finally, we must not mistake the famous calm face of Apollo for the poise of reason, nor his harmonious function as a concern for logical *ordonnance*. All the gods have a wideness of being, a cosmic air, which can hold in a comprehensive calm the most intense outbreaks of energy. And the supra-intellectual is always a harmonising power, keeping all things in step and capable of order and organisation by a direct insight into them.

SOME NOTES ON SRI AUROBINDO'S POEMS *

I

Annotation in the strict sense can be of two kinds. One directly illuminates lines of poetry by correctly construing them or suggesting their right interpretation or setting them beside similar ones found elsewhere or analysing their technical qualities. The other provides the background of event and circumstance from which they get projected. From the strictly artistic viewpoint exact information relating to this background is superfluous: the verse stands by itself, making its own statement or story, picture or symbol, and requires no comparison with real life to add to its intrinsic value.

Thus, to find that there was a special purpose in using the names Cymothea and Myrtilla in one of the closing passages in the first poem in *Songs to Myrtilla* would help little the beauty of the lines. Even the information that Myrtilla is derived from Myrtle, the name of the tree sacred to Venus, does not augment the loveliness of the girl's name or go towards justifying the perfections attributed to her. Again, in the poem *Night by the Sea*, neither the poetic quality nor the passion-poignancy can be increased by our knowing whether the Edith addressed in it existed in the actual Cambridge of Sri Aurobindo's day or, if she did, who precisely she was. Of course, biographical or historical interest, whenever it can be added, is not to be disdained, but the more important task is to make the poem, *qua* poem, go home more effectively and be a keener cultural force.

Stanza 5 of *Night by the Sea* is rather obscure in places and it would be worthwhile clarifying it. I had put before the poet the obscurities and had received a full detailed explanation.

* Mostly published in *Mother India*, June-September, 1957.

Unfortunately the letter has been misplaced and as it had been received several decades ago the explanation cannot be clearly remembered. But some elucidation of particular turns is still possible.

In construing

These no longer. For our rose
In her place they wreathed once, blows

we have to remember that "rose" is personified and the lines are a compact version of: "The boys and girls (who had made love before us in the self-same garden) are now gone and their passionate pleasures are over. For now our rose is in bloom in place of the rose that they once wreathed." The personification of a flower is found elsewhere too. In this very poem, in stanza 2, we have "her" referring to a flower:

Censured honeysuckle guessed
By the fragrance of her breast.

But the reader will be on a false scent if "her" in the phrase "in her place" is read in a possessive connotation and the wreathing is taken to be of "place" and not of "her".

A more difficult proposition is the next couplet:

And thy glorious garland, sweet,
Kissed not once those wandering feet.

How is "kissed" to be interpreted? Is it just a poetic way of saying "touched" or does it convey a particular gesture and emotion—loving self-offering? Whose, again, are the "wandering feet"? We can do no more than surmise that the feet are Edith's own, and that they are called "wandering" because all

feet are more or less on the move on the path of Time, and that Edith's garland is still intact and has not broken and dropped its flowers down to her feet. But other readings may be as plausible and perhaps all guesswork gives less poetry than the strange obscurity about the lines.

The later phrase about Spring (personified),

A lovelier child
His brittle fancies has beguiled,

seems to mean that now it is Edith who has become Spring's favourite, Spring who has rejected (as the preceding lines say) the beauties of girlhood that had been wooed in the past in the same garden.

The next six lines,

O her name that to repeat
Than the Dorian muse more sweet,
Could the white hand more relume
Writing and refresh the bloom
Of lips that used such syllables then,
Dies unloved by later men,

make a generality of the girls loved before Edith in this garden and bemoan all human beauty's transitoriness and the oblivion into which it soon falls. They are somewhat involved and vague, but they may with some assurance be paraphrased and elucidated thus: "If the white hand (of Death or Time) would only agree to brighten up the faded name and quicken the life-bloom on the withered lips that at one time uttered it, then we should know how sweet it were to repeat that name, sweeter than the simple and solemn music in the Dorian mode prevalent in the Greek countryside. But such a name disappears and later men do not cherish it."

The first fourteen lines of stanza 8,

With thy kisses chase this gloom:—
 Thoughts, the children of the tomb.
 Kiss me, Edith. Soon the night
 Comes and hides the happy light.
 Nature's vernal darlings dead
 From new founts of life are fed.
 Dawn relumes the immortal skies.
 Ah! what boon for earth-closed eyes?
 Love's sweet debts are standing, sweet;
 Honeyed payment to complete
 Haste—a million is to pay—
 Lest too soon the allotted day
 End and we oblivious keep
 Darkness and eternal sleep,

are reminiscent in general of Catullus's famous

*Soles occidens et redire possunt.
 Nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
 Nox est perpetua una dormienda.
 Da mi basia mille,*

which Ben Jonson has woven into a couple of "songs" in the same metre as Sri Aurobindo, thus anticipating him in general:

*Come, my Celia, let us prove,
 While we may, the sports of love;
 Time will not be ours for ever:
 He, at length, our good will sever.
 Spend not then his gifts in vain.
 Suns, that set, may rise again:*

But if once we lose this light,
 'Tis, with us, perpetual night...¹
 Kiss me, sweet: the wary lover
 Can your favours keep, and cover...
 Kiss again: no creature comes.
 Kiss, and score up wealthy sums
 On my lips, thus hardly sundered,
 While you breathe. First give a hundred,
 Then a thousand...²

C. H. Herford³ remarks: "The simple intensity of the [Catullus passage] offered no vantage-ground for the salient qualities of Jonson's style, and became, 'literally' rendered, merely smooth and insignificant... Champion came far nearer with the superb Elizabethan Romanticism of his

Heaven's great lamps do dive
 Into their west, and straight again revive,
 But soon as once is set our little light,
 Then must we sleep one ever-during night."⁴

Perhaps some may think the best rendering is not even Champion's. The *cri du coeur* of the brief original, which Sri Aurobindo has caught in a slightly more expansive style, seems brought out by C. S. Havelock's exquisite eight-line adaptation better than by a more or less literal rendering:

The sunset's dying ray
 Has its returning,
 But fires of our brief day
 Shall end their burning

¹ *The Forest*, V.

² *Ibid.*, VI.

³ *Ben Jonson*, edited by C. H. Herford and P. Simpson (Oxford, 1925).

⁴ *A Book of Airs*, 1601, i.

In night where joy and pain
Are past recalling—
So kiss me, kiss again—
The night is falling.

Line 19 of stanza 8, asking the beloved to keep safely shut in her white bosom his own heart

Like a rose of Indian grain,

is interesting because for the first time the poet refers to anything Indian and even directs, though obliquely, the reference to himself. The next specific reference, in these early poems, to matters Indian with now a clear implication of his own Indianness, occurs in *Envoi*. An unspecific one, in the line,

And even my mother bade me homeless rove,

comes in stanza 3 of *Love in Sorrow*.

*
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The Lost Deliverer is a poem found originally in the midst of several concerned with Ireland and particularly with Parnell who is addressed in one of them as "Deliverer lately hailed" and in another as "great deliverer". But it does not seem easy to apply it to Parnell, for, though the Phoenix Park murders committed during his period of nationalist agitation were often wrongly ascribed to his inspiration and though some groups (mostly Roman Catholic) in Ireland itself threw him over after the case for adultery brought by a lieutenant of his, Captain O'Shea, against Mrs. O'Shea whom Parnell subsequently married, there is nothing apparently in Parnell's life to correspond to the phrases:

A weakling sped
The bullet when to custom's usual night
We fell because a woman's faith was light.

This lack of correspondence, however, does not hinder our poetic appreciation of it—least of all is our response lessened to a magnificent turn like

Vainly, since Fate's immeasurable wheel
Could parley with a straw,

which can gain nothing of essential world-wide import from being substantiated by one or other actual event in Parnell's life.

The two opening lines of the same piece,

Pythian he came; repressed beneath his heel
The hydra of the world with bruised head,

run together two incidents of Greek mythology, which have been already explained in the second part of *The World of Sri Aurobindo's Poetry*. The reference is to Apollo and Hercules.

*
**

Lines on Ireland. 1896 express indignation at the abject state into which Ireland fell soon after its petty disownment of Parnell and particularly after his almost unhonoured death in 1891. As poetry it shows a fine command over the heroic couplet, combining flexibility of internal movement and frequent enjambment with the monumental phrase—a sort of transference of the spirit of Miltonic blank verse to the conditions of the couplet as practised by Dryden and others of his age.

The nine lines beginning,

As once against the loud Euphratic host
The lax Ionians of the Asian coast
Drew out their numbers...

refer to the revolt against the Persian rule in 500 B.C. by the Ionians who were made luxurious by the wealth and prosperity of their cities in Asia Minor and had a name for effeminacy. The revolt was put down by King Darius. His success was due both to his own superior forces and to the soft character the Ionians had developed.

The fifty-five lines beginning,

Therefore her brighter fate and nobler soul
Glasnevin with that hardly honoured bier
Received...

speak of Parnell who was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. In the course of them the phrases,

Thus the uncounselled Israelites of old,
Binding their mightiest, for their own ease sold,
Who else had won them glorious liberty
To his Philistian foes,

refer, of course, to Samson, with an elliptical Latinism in "who" for "Him who"; while the reference in

Thus too Heracles
In exile closed by the Olynthian seas,
Not seeing Thebes nor Dirce any more,
His friendless eyelids on an alien shore,

is to Hercules, called Heracles by the Greeks, a native of

Thebes with its neighbouring fountain Dirce. After his famous twelve labours, he fell madly in love with Iole, daughter of Eurytus, King of Oechalia. He was repulsed by Eurytus when he demanded her, and the matter was further complicated by his killing Eurytus's son, for which he had to go into exile for a year, as a slave to the Lydian queen Omphale.

*
**

The Latin epigraph to *Envoi* is from Virgil and forms the conclusion of his *Catalepton V* which runs:

Ite hinc, inanes, ite rhetorum ampullae,
inflata rore non Achaico verba,
et vos, Selique Tarquitique Varroque
scholasticorum natio madens pingui,
ite hinc, inane cymbalon juventuris;
tuque, O mearum cura, Sexte, curarum,
vale, Sabine; jam valete, formosi.
Nos ad beatos vela mittimus portu
magni petentes docta dicta Sironis
vitamque ab omni vindicabimus cura.
Ite hinc, Camenae; vos quoque, ite jam sane,
dulces Camenae, nam fatebimur verum,
dulces fuistis, et tamen meas chartas
revisitote, sed pudenter et raro.

T. H. Warren has a verse translation of it:

Avaunt, ye vain bombastic crew,
Crickets that swill no Attic dew:
Good-bye, grammarians crass and narrow,
Selius, Tarquitiu, and Varro:-

A pedant tribe of fat-brained fools,
 The tinkling cymbals of the schools!
 Sextus, my friend of friends, good-bye,
 With all our pretty company!
 I'm sailing for the blissful shore,
 Great Siro's high recondite lore,
 That haven where my life shall be
 From every tyrant passion free.
 You too, sweet Muses mine, farewell,
 Sweet Muses mine, for truth to tell
 Sweet were ye once, but now begone;
 And yet, and yet, return anon,
 And when I write, at whiles be seen
 In visits shy and far between.

The article on Virgil in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has the following pertinent passage: "After studying rhetoric he began the study of philosophy under Siron the Epicurean. One of the minor poems written about this time in the scazon metre tells of delight at the immediate prospect of entering on the study of philosophy, and of the first stirring of that enthusiasm for philosophical investigation which haunted him through the whole of his life. At the end of the poem, the real master-passion of his life, the charm of the Muses, reasserts itself."¹

Sri Aurobindo's choice of Virgil's lines as his epigraph may be taken to indicate his sense of some great and high work awaiting him beyond the inspiration of the Greek Muse, beyond all poetry even, though never quite excluding it, in the country of his birth about which he writes in the final stanza:

Me from her lotus throne Saraswati

¹ This quotation as well as the full text of Virgil's lines and Warren's translation I owe to Frederick Mendonça, Professor of English, St. Xavier's College, Bombay.

Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.

The great and high work is symbolised by the call of Saraswati who is the Goddess not only of poetry but of all learning, spiritual and secular, and of perfection in life's organisation. Perhaps the "regions of eternal snow" stand for pure spiritual wisdom, the pacing "Ganges" for the majestic flow of the wisdom-touched soul through life's lands until it joins the ocean of the Infinite, and "the flowers of Eden" for the perfected happy details of those soul-fertilised places.

2

With regard to *Urvasie*, the general conception of the Apsaras (or Opsaras, as Sri Aurobindo in his early days under the influence of Bengali pronunciation calls them) may be of interest. Here we may fruitfully draw upon his own Notes, found among his old unrevised writings on Kalidasa's play *Vikramorvasie* which he has rendered into English as *The Hero and the Nymph*. When the Gods and the Titans had joined to churn the primeval Ocean of Being to bring up for the earth a marvel which neither side alone could have evolved, then after aeonic labour and various trying vicissitudes the Apsaras came into being out of the profundities. Says Sri Aurobindo: "The Apsaras are the most beautiful and romantic conception on the lesser plane of Hindu mythology. From the moment that they arose out of the waters of the milky Ocean, robed in ethereal raiment and heavenly adornment, waking melody from a million lyres, the beauty and light of them has transformed the world. They crowd in the sunbeams, they flash and gleam over heaven in the lightnings, they make the azure beauty of the sky; they are the

light of sunrise and sunset and the haunting voices of forest and field. They dwell too in the life of the soul; for they are the ideal pursued by the poet through his lines, by the artist shaping his soul on his canvas, by the sculptor seeking a form in the marble; for the joy of their embrace the hero flings his life into the rushing torrent of battle; the sage, musing upon God, sees the shining of their limbs and falls from his white ideal. The delight of life, the beauty of things, the attraction of sensuous beauty, this is what the mystic and romantic side of the Hindu temperament strove to express in the Apsaras. The original meaning is everywhere felt as a shining background, but most in the older allegories, especially the strange and romantic legend of Pururavas as we first have it in the *Brahmanas* and the *Vishnupurana*."

The Apsaras are also "the divine Hetaira of Paradise, beautiful singers and actresses whose beauty and art relieve the arduous and world-long struggle of the Gods against the forces that tend towards disruption by the Titans who would restore Matter to its original atomic condition or of dissolution by the sages and hermits who would make phenomena dissolve prematurely into the One who is above phenomena." "Ideals of all the plastic and sensuous arts fall within the scope of the Apsara; she is actress, songstress, musician, painter. When they arose from the waves neither the gods nor the demons accepted them as wives; accepted by none they became common to all; for neither the great active faculties of man nor the great destructive recognise sensuous delight and charm as their constant and sufficient mistress, but rather as the joy and refreshment of an hour, an accompaniment or diversion in their constant pursuit of the recognised ideal to which they are wedded."

Urvasie is the fairest of the Apsaras—and Sri Aurobindo, unlike Kalidasa, does not fail to present her as she has been pictured by Hindu mythology. Two fine passages may be

pointed out in this connection. One is the passage in which Pururavus sees Urvasie. Pururavus's words here are not just a lover's idealising imagination running riot: together with it is the expression of the mythopoeic philosophy behind the Apsara-conception. The other passage¹, designable *The Man and the Nymph*, goes to the heart of the matter. Yes, we see here the Goddess-function of Sri Aurobindo's heroine, but still only as felt by Pururavus and known by her sister-companion and not as manifested by her in action. Urvasie in herself bears out almost what Sri Aurobindo notes of Kalidasa's creation: "His presentation of her is simply that of a beautiful and radiant woman deeply in love. Certainly the glories of her skiey residence, the far-off luminousness and the free breath of the winds are about her, but they are her atmosphere rather than part of herself. The essential idea of her is natural, frank and charming womanliness.... If this is a nymph of heaven, one thinks, then heaven must be beautifully like the earth." Sri Aurobindo's poem is meant to be not an epiphany of the Apsara so much as an idyll-epic of human love, showing the rush of a regal heart beyond all bonds and bounds of life towards perfect beauty embodied, a rush through varied scenes of the earth into the above-earth that is the true home of such beauty. We may add that Sri Aurobindo, particularly at the end, does not leave it unrecognised that a rush of this type is not the whole of man's ideal and that this sublime sensuousness, though an uplifting movement of the heart, is bound to leave a good deal of man's destiny unfulfilled. The poem, however, does not abide mainly on the philosophic or ethical level, striking any complete balance of Pururavus's deeds: it depicts centrally the colour and the strength of a one-pointed love daring the seemingly impossible and achieving it.

Urvasie contains a lot of allusions to mythology and legend

¹ Quoted in the essay *The World of Sri Aurobindo's Poetry*, pp. 70-71.

—too many to be exhaustively dealt with. A couple may here be elucidated. In the passage somewhere towards the close, where Pururavus's ascent towards Urvasie is described, the verses—

...In thy line the Spirit Supreme
Shall bound existence with one human form;
In Mathura and ocean Dwarka · Man
Earthly perfectibility of soul
Example—

refer to Sri Krishna the Avatar, traditionally considered the complete incarnation of divinity, who was born in Mathura and many of whose famous deeds were by the waters of Dwarka. He was of the same "lunar line" as Pururavus, unlike the earlier Avatar Sri Rama who belonged to the "solar line" about which are the verses:

...Upon my heights
Breathing God's air, strong as the sky and pure,
Dwell only Ixvaacou's children.

*
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Of *Love and Death* a letter of Sri Aurobindo's (3.7.1933) says: "The poem... was written in a white heat of inspiration during 14 days of continuous writing—in the mornings, of course, for I had to attend office the rest of the day and saw friends in the evening. I never wrote anything with such ease and rapidity before or after.... I don't think there was any falling of the seed of the idea or growth and maturing of it; it just came—from my reading about the story of Ruru in the Mahabharata; I thought, 'Well, here's a subject', and the rest burst out of itself..."

An earlier note—recently found among Sri Aurobindo's

papers and dating itself to about 1919 by referring to *Love and Death*, a work of 1899, as having been “written a score of years ago”—runs:

“The story of Ruru and Pramadvura—I have substituted a name [Priyumvada] more manageable to the English tongue—her death in the forest by the snake and restoration at the price of half her husband’s life is told in the Mahabharata. It is a companion legend to the story of Savitri but not being told with any poetic skill or beauty has remained generally unknown. I have attempted in this poem to bring it out of its obscurity. For full success, however, it should have had a more faithfully Hindu colouring, but it was written a score of years ago when I had not penetrated to the heart of the Indian idea and its traditions, and the shadow of the Greek underworld and Tartarus with the sentiment of life and love and death which hangs about them has got into the legendary framework of the Indian Patala and hells. The central idea of the narrative alone is in the Mahabharata; the meeting with Kama and the descent into Hell were additions necessitated by the poverty of incident in the original story.”

In the lines, occurring in the passage where the God of Love declares himself and there is a demand for sacrifice,

As tyrants in the fierceness of others’ pangs
Joy and feel strong, clothing with brilliant fire,
Tyrants in Titan lands...,

the phrase “clothing with brilliant fire” was put before Sri Aurobindo for elucidation. He replied that it was suggested by “Nero’s ‘living torches’, the Christians indued with combustible matter and set on fire in his fêtes—according to the history (?) or the legend.”

Sri Aurobindo was also asked about the meaning of the word

“absolve” in the following lines from the same passage:

But if with price, ah God! what easier! Tears
Dreadful, innumerable I will absolve
Or pay with anguish through the centuries...

The usage here was contrasted to that in the lines in the passage dealing with Ruru's descent into the Underworld:

For late
I saw her mid those pale inhabitants
Whom bodily anguish visits not, but thoughts
Sorrowful and dumb memories absolve,
And martyrdom of scourged hearts quivering.

Sri Aurobindo replied: “In the second passage it is used in the ordinary sense. ‘Absolution’ means release from sins or from debts—the sorrowful thoughts and memories are the penalty or payment which procures the release from the debt which has been accumulated by the sins and errors of human life. In the first passage ‘absolve’ is used in its Latin and not in its English sense,—‘to pay off a debt’, but here the sense is stretched a little. Instead of saying ‘I will pay off with tears’, Ruru says: ‘I will pay off tears’ as the price of the absolution. This Latinisation and the inversion of syntactical connections are familiar licences in English poetry—of course, it is incorrect, but a deliberate incorrectness, a violence purposely done to the language in order to produce a poetic effect. The English language, unlike the French and some other, likes, as Stephen Phillips used to say, to have liberties taken with it. But, of course, before one can take these liberties one must be a master of the language—and, in this case, of the Latin also.” (1931)

Apropos of “liberties”, we may note two slightly unusual constructions, both of them in the passage concerned with the

speech of the God of Love. In

...Whom thou desirest seeing not the green
And common lovely sounds hast quite forgot—

we have an effective change of turn in the second line where we might expect something like “And quite forgetting common lovely sounds”. Instead, we have an independent clause conferring importance on what is spoken, and “thou” is understood. In

...the wild
Marred face and passionate and will not leave
Kissing dead lips that shall not chide him more—

we have either a relative pronoun or else “it” understood before “will not leave”.

On *Love and Death* we have a couple of valuable comments by the poet himself in private letters. One that touches also on some general issues runs: “A poet likes only the poetry that appeals to his own temperament or taste, the rest he condemns or ignores. Contemporary poetry, besides, seldom gets its right judgment from contemporary critics, even. You expect for instance *Love and Death* to make a sensation in England—I don’t expect it in the least: I shall be agreeably surprised if it gets more than some qualified praise, and if it does not get even that, I shall be neither astonished nor discomfited. I know the limitations of the poem and its qualities and I know that the part about the descent into Hell can stand comparison with some of the best English poetry; but I don’t expect any contemporaries to see it. If they do, it will be good luck or divine grace, that is all. Nothing can be more futile than for a poet to write in expectation of contemporary fame or praise, however agreeable that may be, if it comes: but it is not of much value; for very few poets have enjoyed a great contemporary

fame and very great poets have been neglected in their time. A poet has to go on his way, trying to gather hints from what people say for or against, when their criticisms are things he can profit by, but not otherwise moved (if he can manage it)—seeking mainly to sharpen his own sense of self-criticism by the help of others. Differences of estimate need not surprise him at all.” (2.2.1932)

The other comment concerns the passage in which the Love-God Kama or Madan speaks about himself. In the letter to which it is a reply, some doubt was expressed whether this passage, moving and powerful though it was, could be considered a peak of poetry. The passage runs:

But with the thrilled eternal smile that makes
The spring, the lover of Rathi golden-limbed
Replied to Ruru, “Mortal, I am he;
I am that Madan who inform the stars
With lustre and on life’s wide canvas fill
Pictures of light and shade, of joy and tears,
Make ordinary moments wonderful
And common speech a charm: knit life to life
With interfusions of opposing souls
And sudden meetings and slow sorceries:
Wing the boy bridegroom to that panting breast,
Smite Gods with mortal faces, dreadfully
Among great beautiful kings and watched by eyes
That burn, force on the virgin’s fainting limbs
And drive her to the one face never seen,
The one breast meant eternally for her.
By me come wedded sweets, by me the wife’s
Busy delight and passionate obedience,
And loving eager service never sated,
And happy lips and worshipping soft eyes:

And mine the husband's hungry arms and use
Unwearying of old tender words and ways,
Joy of her hair, and silent pleasure felt
Of nearness to one dear familiar shape.
Nor only these but many affections bright
And soft glad things cluster around my name.
I plant fraternal tender yearnings, make
The sister's sweet attractiveness and leap
Of heart towards imperious kindred blood,
And the young mother's passionate deep look,
Earth's high similitude of One not earth,
Teach filial heart-beats strong. These are my gifts
For which men praise me, these my glories calm:
But fiercer shafts I can, wild storms blown down
Shaking fixed minds and melting marble natures,
Tears and dumb bitterness and pain unpitied,
Racked thirsting jealousy and kind hearts made stone:
And in undisciplined huge souls I sow
Dire vengeance and impossible cruelties,
Cold lusts that linger and fierce fickleness,
The loves close kin to hate, brute violence
And mad insatiable longings pale,
And passion blind as death and deaf as swords.
O mortal, all deep-souled desires and all
Yearnings immense are mine, so much I can."

Sri Aurobindo wrote: "My own private opinion agrees with Arjava's estimate rather than with yours. These lines may not be astonishing in the sense of an unusual effort of constructive imagination and vision like the descent into Hell; but I do not think I have, elsewhere, surpassed this speech in power of language, passion and truth of feeling and nobility and felicity of rhythm all fused together into a perfect whole. And I think

I have succeeded in expressing the truth of the godhead of Kama, the godhead of vital love (I am not using 'vital' in the strict Yogic sense; I mean the love that draws lives passionately together or throws them into or upon each other) with a certain completeness of poetic sight and perfection of poetic power, which puts it on one of the peaks—even if not the highest possible peak—of achievement. That is my private opinion—but, of course, all do not need to see alike in these matters.”
(10.2.1932.)

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An Image is the earliest experiment of Sri Aurobindo's in hexameters. It was written before he had fully evolved his theory of true English Quantity and it needed some corrective touches afterwards, but they were very few.

*
**

Transiit, Non Periit is one of Sri Aurobindo's earliest sonnets—a combination of the Shakespearean form with the Petrarchan-Miltonic. The octet (as Sri Aurobindo used to name what is usually called the octave) is in Shakespearean quatrains unconnected by any repetitive rhyme-structure. The sestet is not a quatrain followed by a couplet but one of the many combinations of three rhyme-pairs possible to the Petrarchan-Miltonic form. Also, the run-on of the octet into the sestet is a Miltonic though not Petrarchan characteristic. The language is semi-Miltonic, especially towards the end where the constructions are somewhat Latinised.

*
**

Chitrangada, fragment of an early composition of which more than one fragmentary version exists, was touched up here

and there when republished in the 'forties from the files of the periodical *Karmayogin* edited by Sri Aurobindo in the first decade of the century. But the line,

I praise my father's prescient love,

seems to have escaped notice, for it remains a tetrameter.

The blank verse is akin to that of *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* while suggesting in places the style of *Baji Prabhou*. Only one technical liberty stands out clear-cut—line 6 with its inverted fifth foot:

Prescient of grey realities. Rising,...

But there is another line with a curious and unusual scansion if it is to be taken as a pentameter:

/ \ / / \ /
 A turretted gate inwalling my rule.

We may note that, like *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* as well as *Savitri* which are Sri Aurobindo's three other blank-verse poems dealing with subjects from mythology or legend, *Chitrangada* has a theme of love and parting under the action of fate:

This year of thee is mine until the end.
The Gods demand the rest.

We may note too that, like those poems, this begins with the motif of darkness passing into day. The transitional dawn-hour has a particular appeal for Sri Aurobindo: *Ilion* begins no less with it. But neither in *Urvasie* nor in *Love and Death* is the dawn given any particular significance or made the immediate *mise en scène*. Though the broad mythico-spiritual im-

port woven into the fabric of the tale as in *Ilion* or the profound philosophico-mystic symbolism integral to the story as in *Savitri* is absent, we have here for the first time in Sri Aurobindo's early narratives a touch of the depths in the dawn-moment against whose pull towards dateless memories and formless yearnings Urjoon warns but which Chitrangada feels as taking us "near to the quiet truth of things". In other poems also of Sri Aurobindo's the dawn is a-quiver with inner suggestions—as when the invocation goes up in *Ahana* from the Hunters of Joy to the Goddess of the first break of inner illumination, and as when the soul has a Vedantic awakening in the short piece entitled *Reminiscence*.

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As the only available copy of the drama, *Perseus the Deliverer*, had some damaged pages, a bit of reconstruction was done here and there for the *Collected Poems and Plays* (1942) and while doing it Sri Aurobindo added—in the same style as the rest of the play—one passage with what seems a prophetic eye to the development of the contemporary phenomenon of Hitler:

This man for a few hours became the vessel
Of an occult and formidable Force
And through his form it did fierce terrible things
Unhuman: but his small and gloomy mind
And impure dark heart could not contain the Force.
It turned in him to madness and demoniac
Huge longings. Then the Power withdrew from him
Leaving the broken incapable instrument,
And all its might was spilt from his body. Better
To be a common man mid common men
And live an unaspiring mortal life

Than call into oneself a Titan strength
 Too dire and mighty for its human frame,
 That only afflicts the oppressed astonished world,
 Then breaks its user.

This passage may be compared with the slightly earlier poem entitled *The Dwarf Napoleon*, dealing with the Nazi dictator.

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Baji Prabhou, though not written on the whole in the strictly epic style which blends amplitude and poise with power, is epic in substance and suggestion everywhere and makes without the least loss in essential poetry a battle-piece comparable to any in the world's best literature. Being blank verse, there is nothing in it of the ballad-tone whose facility as well as jerkiness often lowers the inspiration of such pieces in English literature: it has a terse strong construction, often with a touch of Latinisation, reminiscent of Milton, and its movement is perfectly controlled and manoeuvred. Some of the turns are a little obscure. In the phrase,

Yielding up, the dangerous gorge
 Saw only on the gnarled and stumbling rise
 The dead and wounded heaped,

the two opening words refer to the retreat, "experienced" by the hill, of the broken assailants whom the hill gave up from its slope, thus baring its own contour to view, and from whose ranks the dead and wounded alone were seen by the incline on its difficult terrain. In the phrase,

So hot a blast and fell

Stayed their unsteady valour, their retreat
 So swift and obstinate a question galled,
 Few through the hail survived,

the conjunction "that " is understood after "obstinate" and this adjective goes with "swift" to apply to "retreat" and not to the galling question which without qualifying words and even before the description is over is made to arise as a result of, on the one hand, the deadly intensity of the "blast" and, on the other, the paradoxical character of the retreat ("obstinate" no less than "swift") and the strange combination of boldness and unsteadiness that was met by the blast. This question finds its sense only in the next sentence where the chiefs witnessing the rout and drawing back their forces are said to meet "in dubious council" to decide whether to quit or continue.

The word "griding", liable to be confused with "grinding", in the line,

A Mogul lance ran griding through his arm,

is a word in fair use in older poetry, meaning "to cut or scrape with strident or grating sound". It is followed by the preposition "through" or "along".

Two proper names call for a little explanation. Bhavani is the Goddess-Spirit of India in its martial aspect, guarding the culture and religion of the country with a supernatural sword. Shivaji, fired by the sense of danger to the soul of Hinduism from Aurangzeb's Muslim fanaticism and autocracy, was a devotee of Bhavani and supposed to have been inspired and guided by Her. His devotion was further fostered by the sannyasi saint Ramdas whom he accepted as his guru and at whose feet he was more than once ready to surrender his kingdom. Ramdas influenced the Mahratta mind greatly in those days, as is suggested by the picture, in the poem, of Suryaji

singing to the hills
A song of Ramdas as he smote and slew.

*
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Invitation and *Mother of Dreams* were both written in Alipore Jail in 1907, in two entirely different styles—the one bare and powerful, the other richly and complexly stimulating. It is curious how, despite the four walls of a cell, they breathe of freedom and spaciousness, while the sense of the lonely which the one conveys is but of a sovereign kingdom far above the populous and ordinary human and the feeling of transcendence which the second communicates is of a reaching beyond the outer world through the crowded wonders of the subtle planes towards some “peak of divine endeavour” that is supracosmic.

*
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On the central point of the eight-lined lyric *God*, beginning “Thou who pervadest all the worlds below”, Sri Aurobindo sheds light apropos of two translations of it into Bengali. Replying to one of the translators, D. K. Roy, he writes:

“Your translation of the second verse of my poem seems to take away the force and idea-substance of the original and to substitute a sentimental pseudo-Rabindrian half-thought without much meaning in it. He who is the greatest of the great—‘Mahato mahiyan’—does not disdain to dwell in the clod and the worm, and the vast impartiality shown in this humility is itself the very sign of the greatness of the Divine, that was the idea behind the verse. Does your rendering convey it?

“About R’s rendering, I am afraid it is not very satisfactory either. The idea is that Work and Knowledge and Power can only obey the Divine and give him service: Love alone can compel Him, because of course Love is self-giving and the Divine gives himself in return. As for the second verse it does not give the idea at all. To have no contempt for the clod or the

worm does not indicate that the non-despiser is the Divine: such an idea would be absolutely meaningless and in the last degree feeble. Any yogi could have that equality or somebody much less than a yogi. The idea is that, being omnipotent, omniscient, infinite, supreme, the Divine does not seem to disdain to descend even into the lowest forms, the obscurest figures of Nature and animate them with the Divine Presence: that shows His Divinity. The whole sense has fizzled out in her translation."

*
**

The Vedantin's Prayer is one of the first signs of the typical Aurobindonian Yoga, all the more notable because of the associations of the word "Vedantin". The traditional Vedantin who merges in the infinite silent Self of selves has no call for prayer: prayer can be directed only to some supreme Lord and Lover. Here the usual pressing towards the "hidden door of Knowledge" is mixed with a response to "the eternal Will" and a cry unto Love to outpour and unto Strength to fulfil itself. We may say this is the Vedantin of the many-sided Upanishads and especially of the synthesising Gita, standing on the verge of the spiritual vision and discipline inspired by the Aurobindonian Supermind's integrality.

*
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A Vision of Science is one of the two poems—the other being *In the Moonlight*—which Sri Aurobindo refers to in a letter about the change in scientific outlook in our day. He says that it prophesies the awakening by science to the hollowness of its own early materialistic dogmatism, an awakening which is part presage of a new era of spiritual seeking and experience.

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The inspirational sources, in terms of psychology, of *To the Sea* were stated by Sri Aurobindo in a letter thus: "The poem was produced by a collaboration of the dynamic poetic intelligence with the higher vital urge."

*
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In the Moonlight has the passage:

Two genii in the dubious heart of man,
Two great unhappy foes together bound
Wrestle and strive to win unhampered ground;
They strive for ever since the race began.

One from his body like a bridge of fire
Mounts upward azure-winged with eager eyes;
One in his brain deep-mansioned labouring lies
And clamps to earth the spirit's high desire.

These lines may be compared to some of Goethe's in *Faust*, Englished by G. Lowes Dickinson and Susan Stawell in their *Goethe and Faust* published several years after *In the Moonlight*. The translation runs:

Twin brethren dwell within me, twins of strife,
And either fights to free him from the other;
One grips the earth in savage lust of life,
Clutches the ground and wallows in the mire.
The other lifts himself and struggles free,
Tearing the chains that bind him to his brother,
Beating the air with wings of vast desire
Towards the far realm of his great ancestry.

Apropos of the incarnation of the Divine and the advent of the Age of Gold on the heels of the Iron Age after "the last fierce spasms of the dying past" have shaken the nations, as suggested at the end of *In the Moonlight*, we may quote the magnificent passage from Book III, Canto 4 of *Savitri*:

A gaint dance of Shiva tore the past,
There was a thunder as of worlds that fall;
Earth was o'errun with fire and the roar of Death
Clamouring to slay a world his hunger had made;
There was a clangour of Destruction's wings:
The Titan's battle-cry was in my ears,
Alarm and rumour shook the armoured Night.
I saw the Omnipotent's flaming pioneers
Over the heavenly verge which turns towards life
Come crowding down the amber stairs of birth;
Forerunners of a divine multitude
Out of the paths of the morning star they came
Into the little room of mortal life.
I saw them cross the twilight of an age,
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn,
The great creators with wide brows of calm,
The massive barrier-breakers of the world
And wrestlers with destiny in her lists of will,
The labourers in the quarries of the gods,
The messengers of the Incommunicable,
The architects of immortality.
Into the fallen human sphere they came,
Faces that wore the Immortal's glory still,
Voices that communed still with the thoughts of God,
Bodies made beautiful by the Spirit's light,
Carrying the magic word, the mystic fire,
Carrying the Dionysian cup of joy,

Approaching eyes of a diviner man,
 Lips chanting an unknown anthem of the soul,
 Feet echoing in the corridors of Time.
 High priests of wisdom, sweetness, might and bliss,
 Discoverers of beauty's sunlit ways
 And swimmers of Love's laughing fiery floods
 And dancers within rapture's golden doors,
 Their tread one day shall change the suffering earth
 And justify the light on Nature's face.

*
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Among the poems of Sri Aurobindo's middle period, *The Rishi* represents, in a semi-dramatic form, the fullest philosophic statement of the all-round ancient Indian spirituality, at once life-transcending and life-embracing, which later ages broke up into many divergent strains and finally tended to narrow down to one predominant strain of other-worldly renunciation. The fourfold scheme of experience found in the Mandukya Upanishad is here: Virāt, the gross outer, called Waking—Hiranyagarbha, the subtle inner, called Dream—Prajñā, the causal inmost, called Sleep—the sheer absolute Self, simply called Turiya or Fourth. We must remember that in the Upanishad's Dream there is no unreality, just as in its Sleep there is no emptiness: they merely designate depths of consciousness in which is an existence greater and truer than in the surface dimensions that are usually our life. In fact, Dream is the rich sustaining medium, the world-shaping Thought-power, through which the outer manifestation takes place, while Sleep is the ultimate cause and creator of things, the supreme omniscient and omnipotent Divinity hidden within all and holding in itself the archetypal seed-form of everything. The absolute Self is indeed utterly featureless, an indivisible

unity of infinite Peace, but it is not cut off from the other three poises: those poises are its own and, though as the pure Ground of them it is free of them, their activity is its Peace loosened forth, their multiplicity its Oneness diversely deployed, and its freedom is not limited by non-manifestation even as it is not limited by manifestation.

A direct poetic version of the fourfold scheme is in a passage in *Savitri*, Book XI, Canto 1, pp. 763-765.

3

Ilion in hexameters, illustrating what Sri Aurobindo called "true English Quantity", exists as a fragment consisting of eight Books and a ninth which breaks off before the martial climax is reached: the battle between Achilles and the Amazon Queen Penthesilea. But the state of the manuscript leads one to believe that Sri Aurobindo completed the poem and that the last pages have somehow got lost.

Ilion technically fulfils an inspiration Sri Aurobindo had during his Cambridge days. He has referred to it in one of his talks. While the Alipore Bomb Case was going on in 1908, H. N. Ferrers, a barrister, passed through Calcutta on way to Singapore. About him Sri Aurobindo says: "He had been my class-mate at Cambridge. He saw me in the Court, sitting inside a cage with the other accused and was much concerned. We were put there lest we should jump upon the Judge and murder him ! Ferrers did not know how to get me out; so he had to leave without meeting me. It was he who at Cambridge had given me the clue to the genuine English hexameter. He read out a line from Clough which he thought the best in tone and this gave me the swing of the Homeric metre as it should be in English."

What must have been the line? We do not know for sure, but

we may hazard a very likely guess. In his essay *On Quantitative Metre* Sri Aurobindo first discusses the technique and then comes to the temper of the hexameter. One of his reasons for the deficiency of the existing English hexameter is that the instrument “is compelled to express subjects whose triviality brings it down far below its natural pitch”. Every form has a temper inspiring it and too much deviation from this temper would vitiate the form. Along with a sense of the genuine technique, there must be the hexametrical mood. And it is when Sri Aurobindo is dwelling on this desideratum that we get our hint.

After noting how Clough once or twice rises above his limitations and after quoting some lines where the hexametrical rhythm and its animating mood have both been approximated, Sri Aurobindo tells us: “at another place he rises still higher and suddenly discovers, though only once in a way and apparently without being conscious of his find, the rhythm of the true quantitative hexameter—

Hē like ā | gōd came | lēaving hīs | ample Ō | lȳmpīān | chambēr,

where the opening antibacchius and spondee followed by bounding and undulating dactyls give a sound-value recognisable as akin to the ancient movement. It would be an epic line if it were not in the mock-heroic style; but, even so, if we met it apart from its context, it would remind us at once of the Homeric rhythms—

Be de kat’ Oulumpoio karēnōn choōmenos kēr...”

We may mention that elsewhere Sri Aurobindo has Englished the *Iliad*-line both literally and poetically. Literally it runs:

"And he descended from the peaks of Olympus, wroth at heart..." The poetic rendering in Homer's own metre is:

Down from the peaks of Olympus he came wrath vexing his
heart-strings...

By the side of the elaborate simile, in Book I of *Ilion*, apropos of Deiphobus, already slain by the Gods in their minds, though yet "clanging in arms" in the Trojan streets—

Even as a star long extinguished whose light still travels the
spaces,
Seen in its form by men, but itself goes phantom-like fleeting
Void and null and dark through the uncaring infinite vastness,
So now he seemed to the sight that sees all things from the
Real—

we may set Francis Thompson's lines in *Sister Songs*:

As down the years the splendour voyages
Of some long-ruined and night-submerged star...

Thompson aims, as subsequent lines show, to suggest the poet being survived by his poetry. A moving and original use, this, of a majestic astronomical figure in very fine verse, but Sri Aurobindo conveys a profounder meaning in his great passage than Art's effective continuity in men's remembrance and in their lives after the artist's personal disappearance from life: some deathless Artist Power which has fashioned the whole universe is conjured up in all Its immense and omniscient supremacy.

Thompson, in essential significance, was anticipated by Longfellow in his poem *Charles Sumner*, ending:

Were a star quenched on high,
For ages would its light,
Still travelling downward from the sky,
Shine on our mortal sight.

So when a great man dies,
For years beyond our ken,
The light he leaves behind him lies
Upon the paths of men.

In the speeches of both Penthesilea and Laocoön Ajax is spoken of as having been slain by Penthesilea. In some other passages there is a living Ajax. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that in the Trojan War there were two Ajaxes, the Great and the Small. The Great was the most famous fighter of the Greeks next to Achilles. According to Greek legend and, unlike as in *Ilion*, he died by his own hand when after Achilles's death he lost to Odysseus in the attempt to gain possession of the armour of Achilles. The Small, son of Oileus and called the Locrian, boastful in character and reputed to be the fastest of the Greeks next to Achilles, figures as alive in *Ilion*.

Gades, mentioned in Antenor's speech, is the old name for Cadiz on the south-west coast of Spain and marked for the ancients the farthest point beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, on either side of which were the Mounts Calpe and Abyla called the Pillars of Hercules. It was also known as Gadeira. Pindar, for instance, priding himself on his own unmatched poetry, figures it as Gadeira and says: "Beyond Gadeira no man can pass into the gloom of the West."

In the meeting between Paris and Polyxena, when Polyxena says to Paris, who is on his way to fight Achilles and his hosts, that he is going

Armed with the strength of Fate to strike at my heart in the
battle,

she means that she is in love with Achilles who, as we learn from an earlier passage, sent a proposal for her hand in marriage.

In the *Book of the Chieftains*, Odysseus, in the passage beginning

Rather far would I sail in my ships past southern Cythera,
is made to anticipate the wanderings through which he went for twenty years after the fall of Troy before returning home to Ithaca. The passage has a very dramatic effect, as of prophecy, for all who remember the subject of Homer's *Odyssey*.

The line, put into the mouth of Briseis, in *The Book of the Woman*, apropos of the other world to which she would follow Achilles if he should die,

Stronger there by love as thou than I here, O Achilles,
sounds a little strange in construction until we realise what it means: "Just as here you are physically stronger than I, so there I shall be by virtue of my love stronger than you."

In the passage about the gathering of the Gods before Zeus, in *The Book of the Gods*, Enceladus is mentioned as an inhabitant of the subtle worlds behind the physical, drawing “strength from his anguish under a living Aetna”, because he was killed by Zeus and buried under Mount Aetna in the course of the war between the Gods and the hundred-armed giants of whom Enceladus was one.

In the same passage the lines,

There our sun cannot shine and our moon has no place for
her lustres,
There our lightnings flash not nor fire of these spaces is
suffered,

are a rendering of some famous phrases in the Mundaka Upanishad. The stanza, where these phrases occur, is translated thus by Yeats in collaboration with Purohit Swami: “Neither sun, moon, star, neither fire nor lightning lights Him. When He shines, everything begins to shine.” Sri Aurobindo, less faithful to the letter but more loyal to the spirit, catches the large breath of the inspired Upanishadic Sanskrit in his own prose translation of the Mundaka: “There the sun shines not and the moon has no splendour and the stars are blind. There these lightnings flash not nor any earthly fire. For all that is bright is but the shadow of His brightness and by His shining all this shineth.”

*
**

Sri Aurobindo himself has provided various technical notes to many of his short compositions in quantitative metre—*Trance*, *Shiva the Inconscient Creator*, *The Life Heavens*, *Jivan-mukta*, etc. They have been published together with these poems, and some general indications by him of the themes and

their treatment have also been supplied by him in the same place. What we may do here is to collect the remarks made by him elsewhere on a few of these compositions. Thus, in regard to a translation of the *Alcaics* of *Jivanmukta* into Bengali, he writes in a letter:

“The lines:

Revealed it wakens, when God's stillness
Heavens the ocean of moveless Nature

express an exact spiritual experience with a visible symbol which is not a mere ornamental metaphor but corresponds to exact and concrete spiritual experience, an immense oceanic expanse of Nature-consciousness (not the world) in oneself covered with the heavens of the Divine Stillness and itself rendered calm and motionless by that over-vaulting influence. Nothing of that appears in the translation; it is a vague mental statement with an ornamental metaphor.

“I do not stress all that to find fault, but because it points to a difficulty which seems to me insuperable. This *Jivanmukta* is not merely a poem, but a transcript of a spiritual condition, one of the highest in the inner Overmind experience. To express it at all is not easy. If one writes only ideas about what it is or should be, there is failure. There must be something concrete, the form, the essential spiritual emotion of the state. The words chosen must be the right words in their proper place and each part of the statement in its place in an inevitable whole. Verbiage, flourishes there must be none. But how can all that be turned over into another language without upsetting the apple-cart? I don't see how it can be easily avoided. For instance in the fourth stanza, ‘Possesses’, ‘sealing’, ‘grasp’ are words of great importance for the sense. The feeling of posses-

sion by the Ananda rapture, the pressure of the ecstatic force sealing the love so that there can never again be division between the lover and the All-Beloved, the sense of the grasp of the All-Beautiful are things more than physically concrete to the experience ('grasp' is especially used because it is a violent, abrupt, physical word—it cannot be replaced by 'in the hands' or 'in the hold') and all that must have an adequate equivalent in the translation. But reading X's Bengali line I no longer know where I am, unless perhaps in a world of Vedantic abstractions where I never intended to go. So again what has X's translation of my line to do with the tremendous and beautiful experience of being ravished, thoughtless and wordless, into the 'breast' of the Eternal who is the All-Beautiful, All-Beloved?"



On *Thought the Paraclete* Sri Aurobindo has written:

"As thought rises in the scale, it ceases to be intellectual, becomes illumined, then intuitive, then overmental and finally disappears seeking the last Beyond. The poem does not express any philosophical thought, however; it is simply a perception of a certain movement, that is all.

" 'Pale blue' is the colour of the higher ranges of mind up to the intuition. Above it, it begins to become golden with the supramental Light."

"Thought is not the giver of Knowledge but the 'mediator' between the Inconscient and the Superconscient. It compels the world born from the Inconscient to reach for a Knowledge other than the instinctive vital or merely empirical, for the Knowledge that itself exceeds thought; it calls for that superconscient Knowledge and prepares the consciousness here to receive it. It rises itself into the higher realms and even in disappearing into the supramental and Ananda levels is trans-

formed into something that will bring down their powers into the silent self which its cessation leaves behind it.

“Gold-red is the colour of the Supramental in the physical—the poem describes Thought in the stage when it is undergoing transformation and is about to ascend into the Infinite above and disappear into it. The ‘flame-word rune’ is the Word of the higher Inspiration, Intuition, Revelation which is the highest attainment of Thought.”

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Journey's End, which is in quantitative metre—

The day ends lost in a stretch of even,
A long road trod—and the little farther,
Now the waste-land, now the silence;
A blank dark wall, and behind it heaven—

may be compared with another small piece of Sri Aurobindo's in traditional metre:

ONE DAY

The Little More

One day, and all the half-dead is done,
One day, and all the unborn begun;
A little path and the great goal,
A touch that brings the divine whole.

Hill after hill was climbed and now,
Behold, the last tremendous brow
And the great rock that none has trod:
A step, and all is sky and God.

One Day was among the lines of poetry the Mother read out on the last day of 1954 when she gave the Message for 1955, the year which was said to be a crucial one bristling with difficulties. The Mother went on to say: "Now, as we have talked of difficulties, I wish to read two things, not two poems but some lines, one whole short poem and just one stanza of a poem, which are a very magnificent illustration of our message for the next year and which will give you a little sketch of what the true consciousness is, that which is free from all difficulties, that which is above all conflicts." The one stanza was the end of the piece called *Life*:

Even in rags I am a god;
 Fallen, I am divine;
 High I triumph when down-trod,
 Long I live when slain.

When the Mother was asked: "Will you explain the two passages?" she replied: "Explain? There is no explanation. They speak for themselves very clearly. Poetry is not to be explained. It is to be felt and not reasoned about. The poetic inspiration is above reason. It must not be made to sink into the domain of the reason, because it will get spoiled... It is to be understood by an internal contact much more than by the words."

*
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The Bird of Fire was originally attempted in quantitative metre but the poem did not progress. Then another form was tried and the result was successful—"a kind of compromise between the stress system and the foot measure." About the symbolism Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The Bird of Fire is the living

vehicle of the gold fire of the Divine Light and the white fire of the Divine Tapas and the crimson fire of Divine Love—and everything else of the Divine Consciousness.”

Here we may quote some lines from *Savitri*, Book I, Canto 2, together with Sri Aurobindo's remarks in reference to them:

Almost they saw who lived within her light
 Her playmate in the sempiternal spheres
 Descended from its unattainable realms
 In her attracting advent's luminous wake,
 The white-fire dragon bird of endless bliss
 Drifting with burning wings above her days.

The question asked was: “In the mystical region, is the dragon bird any relation of your Bird of Fire with ‘gold-white wings’ or your Hippogriff with ‘face lustred, pale-blue lined’? And why do you write: ‘What to say about him? One can only see’?” Sri Aurobindo replied: “All birds of that region are relatives. But this is the bird of eternal Ananda, while the Hippogriff is the divinised Thought and the Bird of Fire is the Agni-bird, psychic and tapas. All that however is to mentalise too much and mentalising always takes most of the life out of spiritual things. That is why I say it can be seen but nothing said about it.”

*
**

In Horis Aeternum: “This poem on its technical side aims at finding a halfway house between free verse and regular metrical poetry. It is an attempt to avoid the chaotic amorphousness of free verse and keep to a regular form based on the fixed number of stresses in each line and part of a line while yet there shall be a great plasticity and variety in all the other elements of poetic

rhythm, the number of syllables, the management of the feet, if any, the distribution of the stress-beats, the changing modulation of the rhythm. *In Horis Aeternum* was meant as a first essay in this kind, a very simple and elementary model. The line here is cast into three parts, the first containing two stresses, the second, and third each admitting three, four such lines rhymed constituting the stanza.”

“In this scansion as I conceive it, the lines may be analysed into feet, as...all good rhythm can, but in that case the foot measures must be regarded as a quite subsidiary element without any fixed regularity—just as the (true) quantitative element is treated in ordinary verse. The whole indispensable structure of the lines depends upon stress and they must be read on a different principle from the current view—full value must be given to the true stresses and no fictitious stresses, no weight laid on naturally unstressed syllables should be allowed—that is the most important point.”

| | | | | |
 “A far sail | on the unchangeable monotone | of a slow slum-
bering sea. |

“...The beats are distributed at pleasure: sometimes they are close together, sometimes they stand separated by far intervals amid a crowd of short unstressed syllables. Sometimes there is a closely packed movement loosening itself at the end,—

| | | | | |
 Over its head | like a gold ball, the sun | tossed by the gods in
their play. |

“Sometimes a loose run gathers itself up in its close into a compact movement:

Here or elsewhere, | poised on the unreachable abrupt |
snow-solitary ascent. |

“Or any other movement can be chosen which is best suited to the idea or the feeling of the individual line.”

Musa Spiritus and *Bride of the Fire* breathe a common aspiration towards the eternal Light and its expression in time—the one by a grand movement in which the intense is carried in the immense, the other by a poignant turn which bears the immense in the intense. The former has several lines beginning with a single-syllabled truncated foot (7,11,26,29), and the last line of the final stanza—

Weave from my life His poem of days,
His calm pure dawns and his noons of force.
My acts for the grooves of His chariot-race,
My thoughts for the tramp of His great steeds' course!—

is particularly notable for the heavy thudding “horse-power” in its three closing consecutively stressed monosyllables with their massed “hoof-beat” consonants.

The fragment in Alexandrine, beginning

I walked beside the waters of a world of light,

is Sri Aurobindo's only attempt in the metre which is the staple one of great French poetry. He has some interesting things to say on this metre: "The difficulty, I suppose, is its normal tendency to fall into two monotonously equal halves while the possible variations on that monotony seem to stumble often into awkward inequalities. The Alexandrine is an admirable instrument in French verse because of the more plastic character of the movement, not bound to its stresses but only to an equality of metric syllables capable of a sufficient variety in the rhythm. In English it does not work so well; a single Alexandrine or an occasional Alexandrine couplet can have a great dignity and amplitude of sweep in English, but a succession fails or has most often failed to impose itself on the ear. All this, however, may be simply because the secret of the right handling has not been found: it is at least my impression that a very good rhythmist with the Alexandrine movement secretly born somewhere in him and waiting to be brought out could succeed in rehabilitating the metre."

His own fragment was offered to a disciple as "a map of possibilities (not quite complete of course) without the use of any but an occasional anapaest." He further wrote about the lines: "Some of these can be differently divided, not the way I have done; it depends much on how one wants to read it. But the main thing is that there can be a variation of even or uneven divisions (of the syllables); the even ones have three varieties, 4-8, 6-6, 8-4; the uneven ones may be 5-7, 7-5, 9-3, or even 3-9. The division may be made by the caesura of a foot, a pause in the sentence or a pause of the voice. If there is a succession of similar lines (4-8, 6-6, 8-4 are always tending to come), then great care must be taken to bring in minor variations so that there may be no sheer monotone.

"This, by the way, is my own theory of the Alexandrine evolved at need. I don't know if it agrees with any current

prosody. Perhaps there is not a fixed prosodic theory as the Alexandrine has been left very much in the cold, not having been adopted by any of the great writers."

*
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The Children of Wotan catches vividly the perversely religious vision and exultation that was one of the most effective elements in the cult of Nordic race and blood and steely Titanism which Hitler let loose in Germany and swept outward on the war-path.

4

Most of Sri Aurobindo's Sonnets were written in the late 'thirties though a few were touched up afterwards. Except for *Nirvana*, *The Other Earths* and *Transformation*, which are slightly earlier pieces, they were published after the poet had passed away. All of them are spiritual autobiography, but about the subject of three of them (*Adwaita*, *The Stone Goddess*, *The Godhead*) we have in his letters a passing statement, while of the realisation behind a fourth (*Nirvana*) he has given several descriptions. In a note dictated regarding his early spiritual experiences we read:

"Before he met Lele, Sri Aurobindo had some spiritual experiences, but that was before he knew anything about Yoga or even what Yoga was,—*e.g.*, a vast calm which descended upon him at the moment when he stepped first on Indian soil after his long absence, in fact with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay (this calm surrounded him and remained for long months afterwards); the realisation of the vacant Infinite while walking on the ridge of the Takhti-Suleman [Seat of Solomon] in Kashmir; the living presence of Kali in a shrine on the banks of the Narmada; the vision of the Godhead surging up from

within when in danger of a carriage accident in Baroda in the first year of his stay...”

About the experience of Nirvana we may quote a passage from a note dictated by Sri Aurobindo for Aldous Huxley. Huxley had made a comment on a short excerpt from Sri Aurobindo in his book, *The Perennial Philosophy*. Sri Aurobindo said:

“...After three years of spiritual effort with only minor results he was shown by a Yogi the way to silence his mind. This he succeeded in doing entirely in two or three days by following the method shown. There was an entire silence of thought and feeling and all the ordinary movements of consciousness except the perception and recognition of things around without any accompanying concept or other reaction. The sense of ego disappeared and the movements of the ordinary life as well as speech and action were carried on by some habitual activity of Prakriti alone which was not felt as belonging to oneself. But the perception which remained saw all things as utterly unreal; this sense of unreality was overwhelming and universal. Only some undefinable Reality was perceived as true which was beyond space and time and unconnected with any cosmic activity, but yet was met wherever one turned. This condition remained unimpaired for several months and even when the sense of unreality disappeared and there was a return to participation in the world-consciousness, the inner peace and freedom which resulted from this realisation remained permanently behind all surface movements and the essence of the realisation itself was not lost. At the same time an experience intervened: something else than himself took up his dynamic activity and spoke and acted through him but without any personal thought or initiative. What this was remained unknown until Sri Aurobindo came to realise the dynamic side of the Brahman, the Ishwara and felt himself moved by that in all his sadhana and action...”

To many lines in the Sonnets one can find parallels in *Savitri* though, of course, not always with the same nuance and intent. Perhaps the most easily paralleled are some lines in *The Indwelling Universal* which begins,

I contain the whole world in my soul's embrace:
In me Arcturus and Belphegor burn...

Book VII, Canto 6, of *Savitri* has:

His soul must be wider than the universe
And feel eternity as its very stuff,
Rejecting the moment's personality,
Know itself older than the birth of Time,
Creation an incident in its consciousness,
Arcturus and Belphegor grains of fire
Circling in a corner of its boundless self. . .

Unlike the name "Arcturus", which is well-known for one of the brightest stars in the northern heavens and which has found its way not unoften into literature, "Belphegor" which Sri Aurobindo has brought in with powerful effect has practically no place in popular astronomy and has figured rarely in past literary usage.

However, it has become famous, though not in an astronomical context, in contemporary France because of Julien Benda's book *Belphégor* where, turning its etymological significance (Baal-Peor, Semitic deity of licentiousness) to critical purposes, he has given a new adjective to the French language, *Belphégorien*, to designate certain strains of degeneracy and effeminacy in the intellectual and social life of his country.

The closing couplets of the two sonnets *The Guest* and *The Inner Sovereign*,

He hears the blows that shatter Nature's house:
Calm sits he, formidable, luminous,

and

Nature in me one day like Him shall sit
Victorious, calm, immortal, infinite,

summarise very finely and, because of some repeated expressions, very pointedly the double movement of the Aurobindonian Yoga, the discovery of the "deep deathless being" and then the extension of the inner immortality to the outer being that has so long been accepted as a thrall to limitation and imperfection, mutability and death.

The titles of the two poems are very significant. The one indicates that the Divine is a grand sojourner, safe in the power of His eternity, in a house not His own, as it were: He lives and acts in it, but is yet aloof as well as immune from its gradual breakdown at the hands of Time. The other suggests that this same inner resident is also a master of the house, capable of rebuilding and transforming it into a Nature-image of the Spirit-reality.

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About the composition of all his poetry (and even of all his prose) ever since the experience of the utterly silent mind in 1908, Sri Aurobindo has written in a letter: "I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives. Formerly it used not to be so, the mind was always labouring at the stuff of an unshaped formation. . . The poems come as a stream beginning at the first line and ending

at the last—only some remain with one or two changes, others have to be recast if the first inspiration was an inferior one.” *Savitri* was recast eight or ten times “under the old insufficient inspiration”: afterwards it was written and rewritten wholly “from above”.

Concerning the blank-verse of *Savitri* we may touch on the “Miltonism” so often attributed to this epic. To be in general Miltonic is surely no defect, provided one is not merely an echo. But it does not help the ends of criticism to see Miltonism as soon as we have anywhere a high-pitched blank verse embodying at some length an epic or semi-epic theme. Of course, repeated end-stopping, as in *Savitri*, is bound to de-Miltonise the basic mould. But even the presence of enjambment is insufficient by itself to constitute the Miltonic movement. On the side of form, the latter consists not only of run-over lines but also of complicated sentences and grammatical suspenses building up a closely-knit verse-paragraph in an English markedly Latinised in its turn. On the side of style, the *differentia* is well touched off half-humorously by Sri Aurobindo himself in a remark drawn by the attachment of the Miltonic label to a couple of his lines: “Miltonic? Surely not. The Miltonic has a statelier more spreading rhythm and a less direct more loftily arranged language. Miltonically I should have written not

The Gods above and Nature sole below
Were the spectators of that mighty strife

but

Only the Sons of Heaven and that executive She
Watched the arbitrament of the high dispute.”

On the side of substance, it is the strongly cut imaged idea in a religio-philosophical mood that is Miltonism—the substance which is proper, in one of its aspects, to what Sri Aurobindo has distinguished as the Poetic Intelligence from the really spiritual ranges that are “Overhead”.

Not that thought-form is absent in *Savitri*: there is plenty of it and that is why the poem is a philosophy no less than a legend and a symbol. But the thinking is not from the mental level which is usually associated with thought. Thought-form can be taken by what arrives from Overhead through the Yogi's silent mind and the philosophy in *Savitri* is an idea-structure expressing a mystical vision, a spiritual contact or knowledge which have come by processes of consciousness other than the intellectual. The thought-element in *Savitri* therefore differs from that which is found usually in poets credited with a philosophical purpose—even a poet like Milton whose rhythmic roll seems to have a largeness reminiscent of Overhead inspiration. For, though the rhythm catches something of the Overhead breath, Milton's substance, as Sri Aurobindo has pointed out in a letter, “is, except at certain heights, mental—mentally grand and noble” and his “architecture of thought and verse is high and powerful and massive, but there are usually no subtle echoes there, no deep chambers: the occult things in man's being are foreign to his intelligence”. And it is because of the mixture of a semi-Overhead sweep of sound with a mostly intellectual-imaginative substance that Sri Aurobindo, for all his admiration for Milton, has said: “The interference of this mental Miltonic is one of the great stumbling-blocks when one tries to write from ‘above’.”

Some notion of the difference between the “mental Miltonic” and the Overhead Aurobindonian may be caught, together with other impressions of the latter's rare quality, if we compare a few phrases collected from several sections of

Paradise Lost with a few from the opening of *Savitri*. Milton apostrophises the Divine Spirit:

Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dovelike satst brooding on the vast abyss
And madst it pregnant.¹

He addresses too the original spiritual Light:

Bright effluence of bright essence increate!...
Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice
Of God as with a mantle didst invest
The rising world of waters dark and deep,
Won from the void and formless infinite.²

About the advent of this illumination we may quote him further in the verses:

But now at last the sacred influence
Of light appears, and from the walls of Heaven
Shoots far into the bosom of dim Night
A glimmering dawn.³

He has also depicted an ethereal revelation, an entrance to God's grandeur, in the illumined distances:

The work as of a kingly palace-gate,
With frontispiece of diamond and gold
Embellished; thick with sparkling orient gems
The portal shone, inimitable on Earth
By model, or by shading pencil drawn.⁴

¹ Book I, 19-22.

² Book III, 6, 9-12.

³ Book II, 1034-7.

⁴ Book III, 505-9.

Now look at *Savitri*:

...The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.
Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abysm of the unbodied Infinite...

A long lone line of hesitating hue
Like a vague smile tempting a desert heart
Troubled the far rim of life's obscure sleep.
Arrived from the other side of boundlessness
An eye of deity pierced through the dumb deeps...
Intervening in a mindless universe,
Its message crept through the reluctant hush
Calling the adventure of consciousness and joy
And, conquering Nature's disillusioned breast,
Compelled renewed consent to see and feel.
A thought was sown in the unsounded Void,
A sense was born within the darkness' depths,
A memory quivered in the heart of Time
As if a soul long-dead were moved to live...

Into a far off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture's dim appeal.
The persistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along a fading moment's brink,
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

In one of the sentences of the multi-imaged Dawn-description there is a grammatical inversion which I could recognise only after Sri Aurobindo had explained it. In the lines—

As if solicited in an alien world
With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home,
An errant marvel with no place to live,
Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture's dim appeal—

the word “solicited” is not a past participle passive but the past tense and the subject of this verb is “an errant marvel” delayed to the fourth line by the parenthesis “Orphaned etc.” The object of the inversion is to throw a strong emphasis and prominence upon the line,

An errant marvel with no place to live.

The sense, after “as if”, is not that somebody was being gracefully solicited but that somebody solicited with a timid grace.

Another inversion, not much later, taxes us a little in:

Thus trapped in the gin of earthly destinies,
Awaiting her ordeal's hour abode,
Outcast from her inborn felicity,
Accepting life's obscure terrestrial robe,
Hiding herself even from those she loved,
The godhead greater by a human fate.

A dense magnificent coloured self-wrapped life
Draped in the leaves' vivid emerald monotone...

This is on p. 17. The next comes after a gap of hundreds of pages—on p. 404:

Lost in the emerald glory of the wood.

Thereafter it is fairly frequent and always applied to forest-scenes. Once it is found twice on the same page: 442. Altogether in *Savitri* it plays the part of a stock epithet 21 times. Its last appearance is on p. 806.

The lines—

The dubious godhead with his torch of pain
Lit up the chasm of the unfinished world
And called her to fill with her vast self the abyss—

where the intellectual style is clean overpassed may be juxtaposed with the well-known phrases of Francis Thompson's about the human heart's unrealised grandeurs:

The world, from star to sea, cast down its brink—
Yet shall that chasm, till He who these did build
An awful Curtius make Him, yawn unfilled.

The comparison is interesting particularly because, while it is certain that Sri Aurobindo knew of the act of the fierce Roman patriot Sextus Curtius who jumped, horse-backed and full-armoured, into the deep trench which according to the augurs had to be packed with what Rome deemed most precious if she was to escape heavenly punishment, it is equally certain that he

had not seen Thompson's lines where some of the very words used by Sri Aurobindo—"world", "chasm", "fill"—occur. We become aware how an afflatus with the same charge, as it were, of imaginative words comes in sheer intuitive visionariness and with an undiluted Overhead rhythm in the one instance and in the other with a no less poetic impact but with a more intellectually formulated substance and a vigorous movement which has a rather staccato effect in certain places and which, even when there is a wide sweep, seems to go from point to point in order to enlarge itself instead of presenting immediately a sense of the mysterious depths of being that are astir in the yawning chasm and the tremendous greatness of the Presence that alone can appease them.

Not only the intuitive directness blended with a keen gnomic turn is remarkable in the line:

Earth's winged chimeras are Truth's steeds in Heaven.

The line is notable for its metrical structure also. We have two equal parts balanced on either side by the connecting verb "are" which implies their equivalence on two different planes—and the exact balance of essential significances constituted by the identical number of syllables is reinforced by the stress-scheme being precisely the same in either part: two consecutive stresses followed by a stress between two slacks—

$\begin{array}{ccccccc} / & & / & & x & / & x & & / & & / & & x & / & x \\ \text{"Earth's winged chimeras", "Truth's steeds in Heaven."} \end{array}$

Metrical as well as rhythmical effects of expressive originality are abundant in *Savitri*. There is:

With the Truth-Light strike earth's massive roots of trance.

Here we have a sense of both striking power and massive rootedness through the five successive stresses after the first two words. Or take

Heaven's wa|ters trailed |and dribbled |through the |drowned
land.

Here, together with the various suggestive alliterations, particularly of *r* in association with *t*, *d*, *th* and of “d” in association with “l” and “n”, we have a scansion diversely pointing the many shades of the description.

We have again some fine metrical and rhythmical effects in the passage about the hierarchy of worlds towards the close of Book, I Canto 5. The lines,

Her gulfs stood nude, her far transcendences
Flamed in transparencies of crowded light,

have a strong startling impact of disclosure in the three consecutive stresses at almost the beginning, the last on a quantitatively long syllable reinforcing the sense of a penetration of depths. The second part of the opening line has two unstressed syllables at the end, giving a sense of the remote and unseized. The inverted foot, a trochee, starting with an accented intrinsic long the next line counteracts this sense and creates a revelatory stroke and the word "transparencies" which balances the word "transcendences" of the preceding line and has the same dying away slack-

ending gives now an impression which is the very opposite of the remote and unseized, an impression of the unresisting and easily grasped. The final phrase “crowded light” is all the more accurately expressive because the stresses are not successive: the light, for all its crowdedness, has yet to be not dense but transparent and this is achieved metrically and rhythmically by a slack coming between the stresses, while the crowdedness is conveyed by the divided stresses falling on two quantitatively long syllables and thus counteracting whatever dispersiveness may be suggested by the division.

Another piece of metrical and rhythmical memorableness is the line,

A last high world was seen where all worlds met.

Here the coming together of stresses in exactly the same way in two places (the first two feet and the last two) and the close play of long quantities there and the stance of a single long quantity in the middle foot of the line’s five and the arrangement of the vowel sounds either differing from or agreeing with one another and, finally, the unbroken uniform run on and on of monosyllables—all these conjure up vividly the subtle reality expressed with simple and clear words.

On p. 214, in

Watched her charade of action for some hint,
Read the Nō-gestures of her silhouettes—

“Nō” refers to a form of Japanese lyric drama, also known as “Noh”. Naturally, it has nothing to do with negation such as in the lines (p. 227):

A limping Yes through the aeons journeys still

Accompanied by an eternal No.

The line in *Savitri* which seems to take the longest time to read is on p. 348:

The great schemed worlds that they had planned and wrought.

Every word is a monosyllable and six out of the ten words—"great, schemed, worlds, they, planned, wrought"—are quantitatively long, being either supported on a vowel-sound of intrinsic length or else having the vowel-time drawn out by succeeding consonants.

The line in *Savitri* composed of the least number of words is on p. 399:

Architectonic and inevitable...

The passage about the abysm of Hell in Book II Canto 7, one of the most intensely etched in *Savitri*, has a marked play of alliteration in several lines hammering home the ubiquitous hellishness:

Neighbouring proud palaces of perverted Power...
The implacable splendour of her nightmare pomps...
Trampled to tormented postures the torn sense...
A bull-throat bellowed with its brazen tongue...
A travelling dot on downward roads of Dusk...
In a slow suffering Time and tortured Space...

In the use and choice of words, too, *Savitri* comes often with highly original gestures. There is the uplifting of a non-poetic word beyond its common connotation into poetic effectiveness, as in

Then shall the business fail of Death and Night,

where the commercial note is fully exploited by “fail” being added to “business” and even a partnership indicated. There is an energy of unsqueamish violence which is yet memorable poetry, as in

Then perish vomiting the immortal soul
Out of Matter’s belly into the sink of Nought.

There is a drawing upon other languages for exact effects, as in

Knowledge was rebuilt from cells of inference
Into a fixed body flasque and perishable,

where the French word “flasque” is more significant in sound and serves better the rhythmic end than would its English synonyms—“slack”, “loose” or even “flaccid”. Over and above all these gestures of original utterance Sri Aurobindo shows an inventive audacity by the employment of new words and new usages, either based on English or continental languages. We have

A single law simplessed the cosmic theme—

or a similar treatment of an English noun:

Ambitioned the seas for robe, for crown the stars.

We have even a clear neologism for “immensities” in

And driven by a pointing hand of light

Across their soul's unmapped immensitudes,
on the analogy of "infinitudes" for "infinities". It recurs:

A little gift from the immensitudes,
But measureless to life its gain of joy.

The same neologism comes also in the singular number along with "infinity":

In their immensitude signing infinity
They were the extension of the self of God...

Savitri's father, who is "the traveller of the world's" and whose Yogic explorations start with Canto One of Book II and come to an end with Canto Four of Book III, covering in all nineteen Cantos, is nowhere mentioned by name until the very last one.

There, on p. 386, for the first time and quite casually as if it were a familiar appellation by now, we come to know that he is "Aswapathy":

But Aswapathy's heart replied to her...
And the meaning of the name is indirectly conveyed to us at the conclusion of the same Canto:

The Lord of Life resumed his mighty rounds
In the scant field of the ambiguous globe.

"Aswapathy" literally stands for "The Lord of the Horse". But in the old Vedic symbolism the Horse represents the Life Force.

In Book VII Canto 5, concerned with the finding of the Soul, the line

A being no bigger than the thumb of man,

is a translation from the Katha Upanishad where the inmost soul of man, divine in essence, governing his many lives and evolving through the ages into the Supreme Spirit's infinity, is spoken of in these terms.

In the long passage (pp. 598-99) beginning—

But now the half-opened lotus bud of her heart
 Had bloomed and stood disclosed to the earthly ray;
 In an image shone revealed her secret soul.
 There was no wall severing the soul and mind,
 No mystic fence guarding from the claims of life.
 In its deep lotus home her being sat
 As if on concentration's marble seat,
 Calling the mighty Mother of the worlds
 To make this earthly tenement her house.
 As in a flash from a supernal light,
 A living image of the original Power,
 A face, a form came down into her heart
 And made of it its temple and pure abode.
 But when its feet had touched the quivering bloom,
 A mighty movement rocked the inner space
 As if a world were shaken and found its soul:
 Out of the Inconscient's soulless mindless Night
 A flaming serpent rose released from sleep—

an experience is described, which is well-known to Indian Yoga. But here the process is a little different. The Power or

Shakti of the Divine—Kundalini—sleeping coiled like a serpent in the *chakra* or lotuslike circle in the subtle body—*sukshma sharira*—at a place corresponding to the base of the spine in the gross physical body is here awakened not directly from below by Yogic concentration and special breath-exercise but by the descent of an Overhead Force into the lotuslike circle situated in the heart-region through which the evolving soul, the being no bigger than the thumb of man, gets most directly into contact with the rest of man's complex nature organised round it.

It is not easy to construe the passage (p. 122):

A brute half-conscious body serves as means
A mind that must recover a knowledge lost
Held in stone-grip by the world's Inconscience
And wearing still these countless knots of Law
A spirit bound stand up as Nature's king.

If we put a comma after "Law" and after "bound" and mentally read "must" before "stand", the sense is clarified. The last line would then link up with

A mind that must recover a knowledge lost.

The line (p. 297)—

Above the Masters of the Ideal throne—

has "Above" as an adverb and "throne" as an intransitive verb equivalent to "sit throned".

A Latin construction not infrequent in Sri Aurobindo may be exemplified by a line on p. 811, the middle one of the passage:

And the swift parents hurrying to their child,—
 Their cause of life now who had given him breath,—
 Possessed him with their arms.

Here "Their"="of them". The relative pronoun "who" goes with the understood "them". The meaning of the line is : "Satyavan who was now the cause of the life of his parents who had given him life."

Some untangling is required for the last words (p. 813) spoken by Savitri:

"Awakened to the meaning of my heart
 That to feel love and oneness is to live
 And this the magic of our golden change
 Is all the truth I know or seek, O sage."

There should be a comma after "heart": otherwise the next line would seem an explanation of the word "meaning" in the first. But if we join up these two lines, no sense can be made of them, for a verb would be missing. "Is" of the last line cannot serve the purpose. Nor can it be the verb for the third line without leaving the first two verbless. The only way out, it seems, is to make "Awakened" go with "I", and then the prose-order of the passage would be "That to feel love and oneness is to live, and (that) this (is) the magic of our golden change, is all the truth which I, awakened to the meaning of my heart, know or seek, O sage," or one may put "And this the magic of our golden change" between two dashes as a parenthetical comment.

THE LONGEST SENTENCE IN ENGLISH POETRY

The longest sentence in English poetry—143 words and, if a compound is counted as two, 144—is in *Savitri*, Book IV, Canto III, p. 426.

We must understand, of course, that true sentence-length does not really depend on putting a full-stop as late as possible and substituting commas and semi-colons and colons for it wherever we can. The true length is organic. The construction is such that the components, however independent-seeming, are grammatically inseparable. Many of them are really subordinate clauses or else contain words that internally link them together, as against mere external linkage by means of *and*'s, which add mechanically rather than organically to the length of a sentence. In the instance from *Savitri* we have an ultra-Homeric simile, a long-drawn-out comparison whose sense, beginning with "As", is completed only when the full comparative picture has been painted and then the central situation which the simile illuminates is stated. If a sentence starts with an "As", it cannot be complete until there is a "so also" or its equivalent in some form at the other end to introduce the main theme.

Further, in a truly long sentence, not only is the syntax organic: the very organicity has what we may call a living limitativeness which practically ensures that the sentence would assimilate within its vital system only the right amount of detail necessary to unfold the central meaning: a limit is intrinsically imposed upon the length, rendering this length, and no other, vitally significant. Such organicity is different from that of a passage where to enrich the theme one can go on drawing the length out with illustrative *minutiae*. In short, with organicity itself there can be a certain type of mechanical additiveness.

Thus *A Nocturnal Reverie* by Anne, Countess of Winchelsea (1660?-1720), cast in heroic couplets, consists of one long sentence running into 50 lines and 367 words or, with each of its four compounds rating as two words, 371. The main clause does not appear until the forty-sixth line; most of the poem up to this point is a series of qualifying clauses. But the structure has no living limitativeness in the strict sense. The poem starts with

In such a night, when every louder wind
Is to its distant cavern safe confined—

and continues with particular on particular of imagery intended to create an atmosphere of peace, all the images introduced by the conjunction “when.” The images do serve a single mood or impression, but they are not dictated by any palpable necessity which would exclude others—nor are they even in direct spatial relationship among themselves. There is no internal reason why, with more abundant observation, the poet should not have gone on adding many more than she had already done. In the sentence from Sri Aurobindo we have no open-endedness of this sort. The theme demands a special restricted development: nothing except a number of relevant details can be brought in within the organic form, giving it its length.

Sri Aurobindo’s theme is: how, on hearing some words from her father Aswapathy, Savitri wakes up to the sense of her true mission:

As when the mantra sinks in Yoga’s ear,
Its message enters stirring the blind brain
And keeps in the dim ignorant cells its sound;
The hearer understands a form of words
And, musing on the index thought it holds,
He strives to read it with the labouring mind,

But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth:
Then, falling silent in himself to know
He meets the deeper listening of his soul:
The Word repeats itself in rhythmic strains:
Thought, vision, feeling, sense, the body's self
Are seized unalterably and he endures
An ecstasy and an immortal change;
He feels a Wideness and becomes a Power,
All knowledge rushes on him like a sea:
Transmuted by the white spiritual ray
He walks in naked heavens of joy and calm,
Sees the God-face and hears transcendent speech:
An equal greatness in her life was sown.

Perhaps the next longest sentence—141 words and, if the three compounds count each for 2, 144 as in Sri Aurobindo's sentence—ends Matthew Arnold's *Scholar Gypsy*, again a unit composed of an elaborated simile.

In this connection it may be of interest to mention that the longest sentence in English prose—659 words—is said to be in Chapter 4, Section 6 of Jeremy Taylor's well-known book *Holy Dying*. The next longest—432 words—occurs, I gather, on pp. 80-81 of the English translation of Proust's *Swann's Way* (Chatto & Windus's Phoenix Library). The longest after this—321 words—comes on p. 624 of *The Life Divine* by Sri Aurobindo (American Edition, 1949). This sentence is the second in the paragraph which starts speaking of "a unity behind diversity and discord" as "the secret of the variety of human religions and philosophies". It runs:

"Whether they see dimly the material world as the body of the Divine, or life as a great pulsation of the breath of Divine Existence, or all things as thoughts of the cosmic Mind, or realise that there is a Spirit which is greater than these things, their

subtler and yet more wonderful source and creator,—whether they find God only in the Inconscient or as the one Conscious in inconscient things or as an ineffable superconscious Existence to reach whom we must leave behind our terrestrial being and annul the mind, life and body, or, overcoming division, see that He is all these at once and accept fearlessly the large consequences of that vision,—whether they worship Him with universality as the Cosmic Being or limit him and themselves, like the Positivist, in humanity only or, on the contrary, carried away by the vision of the timeless and spaceless Immutable, reject Him in Nature and Cosmos,—whether they adore Him in various strange or beautiful or magnified forms of the human ego or for His perfect possession of the qualities to which man aspires, His Divinity revealed to them as a supreme Power, Love, Beauty, Truth, Righteousness, Wisdom,—whether they perceive Him as the Lord of Nature, Father and Creator, or as Nature herself and the universal Mother, pursue Him as the Lover and attracter of souls or serve Him as the hidden Master of all works, bow down before the one God or the manifold Deity, the one divine Man or the one Divine in all men or, more largely, discover the One whose presence enables us to become unified in consciousness or in works or in life with all beings, unified with all things in Time and Space, unified with Nature and her influences and even her inanimate forces,—the truth behind must ever be the same because all is the one Divine Infinite whom all are seeking.”

This sentence may at first strike one as mechanically additive within its organic structure rather than as coming alive with an internal limitativeness. But actually the alternatives listed have a self-restrictive character: only a fixed number of them are relevant, exhausting the real possibilities of the variety into which human religions and philosophies can meaningfully proliferate in relation to the secret divine unity.

A LATINISED ADJECTIVE IN ENGLISH

A CORRESPONDENCE WITH SRI AUROBINDO

A humorous discussion with Sri Aurobindo about a Latinised adjective for poetic use may not be out of place here. For it links up ultimately with a poem of his own. I put to him questions and he replied.

(In my lines—

*This heart grew brighter when your breath's proud chill
Flung my disperse life-blood more richly in—*

a terminal d will at once English that Latin fellow "disperse", but is he really objectionable? At first I had "Drove" instead of "Flung"—so the desire for a less dental rhythm was his raison d'être, but if he seems a trifle weaker than his English avatar, he can easily be dispensed with now.)

"I don't think 'disperse' as an adjective can pass—the dentals are certainly an objection but do not justify this Latin-English neologism."
(12-6-1937)

(Why should that poor "disperse" be inadmissible when English has many such Latinised adjectives—e.g. "consecrate", "dedicate", "intoxicate"? I felt it to be a natural innovation and not against the genius of the language: I discover from the Standard Dictionary now that it is not even a neologism—it is only an obsolete word. I have a substitute ready, however:

Flung my diffuse life-blood more richly in.

But is not “disperse” formed on exactly the same principle as “diffuse”? By the way, does “dispersed” make the line really too dental, now that “Flung” is there and not the original “Drove”)

“I don’t think people use ‘consecrate’, ‘intoxicate’ etc. as adjectives nowadays—at any rate it sounds to me too *recherché*. Of course, if one chose, this kind of thing might be perpetrated—

O wretched man intoxicate,
 Let not thy life be consecrate
 To wine’s red yell (spell, if you want to be ‘poetic’).
 Else will thy soul be dedicate
 To Hell—

but it is better not to do it. It makes no difference if there are other words like ‘diffuse’ taken from French (not Latin) which have this form and are generally used adjectives. Logic is not the sole basis of linguistic use. I thought at first it was an archaism and there might be some such phrase in old poetry as lids¹ disperse, but as I could not find it even in the Oxford which claims to be exhaustive and omniscient, I concluded it must be a neologism of yours. But archaism or neologism does not matter. ‘Dispersed life-blood’ brings three d’s so near together that they collide a little—if they were farther from each other it would not matter—or if they produced some significant or opportune effect. I think ‘diffuse’ will do. (13-6-1937)

(What do I find this afternoon? Just read:

Suddenly
From motionless battalions as outride

¹ Uncertain reading—K.D.S.

*A speed disperse of horsemen, from that mass
Of livid menace went a frail light cloud
Rushing through heaven, and behind it streamed
The downpour all in wet and greenish lines.*

This is from your own Urvasie, written in the middle nineties of the last century. Of course it is possible that the printer has omitted a terminal d—but is that really the explanation?)

“I dare say I tried to Latinise. But that does not make it a permissible form. If it is obsolete, it must remain obsolete. I thought at first it was an archaism you were trying on, I seemed to remember something of the kind, but as I could find it nowhere I gave up the idea—it was probably my own crime that I remembered.”

(29-6-1937)

“HEAVEN’S VAST EAGLE”

DISCUSSION OF A LITERARY POINT

A READER’S LETTER

In *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo* (p. 26) you find some small fault with “Like heaven’s vast eagle” in the lines from the very early narrative poem of Sri Aurobindo, *Urvasie*:

Like heaven’s vast eagle all that blackness swept
Down over the inferior snowless heights
And swallowed up the dawn.

You suggest instead: “Like a vast eagle”, which appears reasonable. And then realizing that “heaven” was there for rhythm you would allow “Like *some* vast eagle”, which surprises me for its flatness and inappropriateness.

I’m all the more perplexed because you say that this would “stir the imagination with a clearer and closer touch”—but in your poem “Sri Aurobindo” (*The Secret Splendour*, p. 60) you have

Eagles of rapture lifting, flickerless,
A golden trance wide-winged on golden air.

Would you then not delete “rapture” here for a clearer, closer touch and make up the metre in another way?

This is just a dart from my provocative nature on a vital-pressured day.

THE AUTHOR’S REPLY

Your dart of a question is welcome. My answer, to be clear, has to be a little lengthy, more a lance than a dart.

By way of a preamble I may confide that I am not in the habit of sitting in corrective judgment on the inspiration of a poet like Sri Aurobindo. In my book, although I did discriminate between several levels no less than kinds, I could not but recognise the varied excellence of his work. Only in this particular matter I offered a direct, even if passing, criticism of a different order. Sri Aurobindo himself saw all that I had written in my book. With his grand impartiality he allowed all sorts of views on his poetry wherever some case could be made out. I cannot definitely claim that he must have seen eye to eye with me in these comments of mine on a very early bit of his poetic output. But I have a sense that if I had made an entire *faux pas* in critical estimate he would have been kind enough to guide me. So I may make bold now to put up a defence of my attitude.

First, I must refer you back to the precise reason I give for inclining to pick fault with “heaven’s” in the line: “Like heaven’s vast eagle...” I am not taking “heaven” as an equivalent of “sky” and understanding the poet to imply that the bird known as the eagle, which belongs to the domain of sky, is a vast one. No known eagle can be so vast as to be comparable to the storm that the poet is describing. The poet is alluding to the mythological Garuda whom Vyasa in the *Mahābhārata* describes as colossal and as having eyes like lightning and whose exploits in the heavenly regions he recounts at great length. Although the word “heaven” has a value for the metrical rhythm, I contend that the Garuda-allusion will be missed by the general reader and so his imagination will not be stirred sufficiently: a clearer and closer touch is wanted. That touch, according to me, would come with either “a” or

“some” in place of “heaven’s”. Now the point of these substitutes is not just to send the reader’s mind to the known bird *aquila*. If that were the point, the adjective needed would be “the”. The suggestion has to be rather indefinite even while a particular species of bird is mentioned. The eagle has to be “vast” with a vastness beyond any possessed by the big bird of that name. Then alone will there be true competence of comparison, a simile measuring up to the phenomenon described. Both “a” and “some” take us out of mere ornithology into a sphere of suggestion exceeding nature even while borrowing a form from nature.

Now, as between the alternatives I offer, I think at present that “some” is not only rhythmically more strong, inviting a semi-stress, but is also more successful in lifting us out of nature’s repertory to conjure up a real *rara avis*—an eagle which might have been—a black king-bird huge enough to blot out “the dawn.” The article “a”, for all its indefiniteness, can have still a certain naturalistic individualising import here. Although we need not, we may tend to think of one member of a tribe of vast eagles such as may be existing in the natural world. “Some” sweeps us clean away into a meta-biology of the imagination.

I feel that your sense of “flatness and inappropriateness” with regard to this adjective comes from the loose common usage in which “some” does duty for mere non-specification, as in your letter’s own: “find some small fault...” In poetry it has at times an effective role which cannot be played by “a”. You can see its irreplaceableness even in a simple expression like Wordsworth’s—

Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again!

At a deeper level, we have F. T. Prince’s

And even we must know what no one yet has understood,
That some great love is over what we do...

At an intenser pitch, there are Browning’s phrases:

...some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile:...
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!

In a more visionary vein, you have Sri Aurobindo’s own:

A Splendour is there, refused to the earthward sight,
That floods some deep flame-covered all-seeing eye...

or else:

As some bright archangel in vision flies
Plunged in dream-caught spirit immensities...

I now come to your last point. You ask me why I write

Eagles of rapture lifting, flickerless,
A golden trance wide-winged on golden air—

instead of deleting “rapture” in order to have a clearer, closer touch, just as I have asked for the deletion of “heaven’s” in Sri Aurobindo’s “eagle”-line. After the explanation I have given about the mythology of “heaven”, you will perceive that my “rapture” belongs to a different universe of discourse. It

would be comparable if “heaven” signified “bliss”. Actually “heaven” stands for “Supernature” and Supernature’s eagle is brought in not because of any rapture-association but because of its supposed immense size. No experience-concept of the spiritual life is here. My “eagles” are rapture turned aquiline, ecstasy mightily upborne, ample-poised, steeped in truth-light.

I may have been rash in wanting a more seizable figure from Sri Aurobindo in that line out of a poem shot with Indian imagery; but aren’t you a little more rash in darting a *tu quoque* at me for my metaphor? When I speak of “a clearer and closer touch” I do not desire something more earthly, something nearer home, passing more directly to men’s bosoms and businesses. I only have in mind what is poetically more realisable, imaginatively more kindling, emotionally more intimate or penetrating. Were my eagles to cease being rapture-substanced, rapture-formed, rapture-motioned, would they touch you more clearly and closely in the sense I have indicated?

By the way, your letter pictures me as “realizing that ‘heaven’ was there for rhythm”. I do appreciate the metrical-rhythmic weight of the word, but surely I don’t think Sri Aurobindo was going by the ear alone? He had his eye on the avian hero of Indian mythological tradition. My reference to the rhythm served merely to direct attention to the expressive value, the suggestive strength, brought by the stress which a word like “heaven” would take in the line.

TWO CRITICS CRITICISED*

I

In the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (July 31, 1949) appeared a comment on Sri Aurobindo's poetry. It was by the periodical's editor, an Irishman, C. R. M., in "Books and Comments" and was meant to review my study, *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*. After calling my book interesting, C. R. M. went on to say:

“For Mr. Sethna, Sri Aurobindo’s Muse is a case of ‘this side idolatry’, and I am not so sure that genius is so rampant here as he claims. The merits seem to me to consist of a high level of spiritual utterance, abundant metrical skill, and a sound poetic sensitivity based on the classics and much akin to that of many of the more conservative masters. Sometimes it is as if Sri Aurobindo had taken the cream of Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson and stirred it to boiling point in the cauldron of his Muse. There are some first-rate passages of blank verse, *e.g.*:

Only he listens to the voice of his thoughts, his heart's
ignorant whisper,
Whistle of wind in the tree-tops of Time and the rustle of
Nature.

“Elsewhere there are many pleasant lines of a derivative nature and it is interesting to find traces of the influence of that Yellow Book character, the poet Stephen Phillips, who was at Cambridge with Sri Aurobindo. The Tennysonian influence is stronger:

* First published in *Mother India*, September 3, 1949, except for the change of a few quotations in order to avoid repeating some matter used elsewhere.

And lightning 'twixt the eyes intolerable
 Like heaven's vast eagle all that blackness swept
 Down over the inferior snowless heights
 And swallowed up the dawn.

"This, in spite of, or because of, that horrible word '*twixt* (a crutch for amateur versifiers!) might be from the *Idylls*, and, by stressing the resemblance, one does not mean to decry Sri Aurobindo's talents, for Victoria's laureate was a master of rhythm and a true delineator of beauty."

Naturally, as the author of *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*, I could not let C.R.M.'s comments pass. I wrote him a letter and requested its publication. The reply, though not ungenerous, scarcely served my purpose. It ran: "I find your letter on Sri Aurobindo's poetry very interesting and well-expressed (though it hasn't changed some of my opinions!) but I regret that my space is so confined that there is no room for it and we have no correspondence column in the *Weekly*." As C. R. M. is a gifted writer of considerable popularity and his readers may accept his estimate of Sri Aurobindo, it is necessary that I should voice in *Mother India* what was originally meant for the *Weekly*.

THE ORIGINALITY OF A MASTER OF YOGA

C. R. M.'s paragraphs, though appreciative in places and hitting off the truth here and there, seem to me on the whole to miss the mark because of his rather cursory acquaintance with Sri Aurobindo's poetry and a certain haste in making up his mind.

When he pictures Sri Aurobindo as sometimes stirring and boiling the cream of Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson in his own Muse's cauldron, it is not easy to agree even if the critic's

statement be applied to Sri Aurobindo's early work which is not that of a full-fledged Yogi; but when we come to his later work—especially his latest and longest, the epic *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, to which I have devoted many pages in my book—the statement loses all relevance. Milton's intellectual theology, Wordsworth's half-philosophical half-emotional pantheism and Tennyson's vague religious idealism can hardly be equated with the vision and experience of a Master of Yoga. As for the manner, it is equally individual in its turns and tones. Except that Sri Aurobindo, like Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson, does not bring in the typical modernist idiom *à la* Eliot of *The Waste Land*, nowhere are these poets discernible in either the substance or the style of lines like

Impassive he lived, immune from earthly hopes,
 A figure in the ineffable Witness' shrine
 Pacing the vast cathedral of his thoughts
 Under its arches dim with infinity
 And heavenward brooding of invisible wings,

or,

A greater force than the earthly held his limbs,
 Huge workings bared his undiscovered sheaths,
 Strange energies wrought and screened tremendous hands
 Unwound the triple cord of mind and freed
 The heavenly wideness of a godhead's gaze,

or,

In moments when the inner lamps are lit
 And the life's cherished guests are left outside,
 Our spirit sits alone and speaks to its gulfs.
 Invading from spiritual silences

A ray of the timeless Glory stoops awhile
To commune with our seized illumined clay
And leaves its huge white stamp upon our lives.

These lines, with their direct mystical insight and their suggestive rhythm carrying the concrete life-throb of a Yogi's supra-intellectual consciousness, are not only different in a striking way from the typically Miltonic, Wordsworthian or Tennysonian poetry but also lead us to question C. R. M.'s phrase: "a sound sensitivity based on the classics and much akin to that of many of the more conservative masters". The term "conservative" is in itself debatable. What are called the "classics" are seldom conservative except in the sense that they are not flashy and flamboyant, addicted to involved conceit and confusing imagery, limping in metre and jaggedly irregular in form. If actually there are any conservative masters, the poet of *Savitri* is little akin to them in sensitivity. He has a warm suddenness of simile, a sweeping boldness of metaphor, a varicoloured intensity of vision, a breath-bereaving grandeur of intuition. Nor can the sensitivity shown in these things be said to have its basis in the classics, though the latter too are beautifully or powerfully vivid. Rather a vividness most revolutionary is at work in the Aurobindonian sensitivity—simile, metaphor, vision, intuition, all are of an unusual inner experience mostly beyond the classics. Sri Aurobindo's sensitivity is based on the classics in only one respect: it is neither morbid nor injudicious and has a certain poise and control even in the midst of extreme novelty and force. "Sound" it is, in the best connotation of the term, like the sensitivity of the classics, but its soundness, like that of theirs, is an attribute which makes for the genuinely great utterance as distinguished from the merely rushing, dazzling, distracting speech, and does not imply any imitativeness or want of "fine frenzy."

IS SRI AUROBINDO'S EARLY BLANK VERSE
LIKE TENNYSON'S *Idylls*?

As regards the early blank verse, written mostly in the poet's own twenties and in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the comment that in it the Tennysonian influence is the strongest—especially from the *Idylls of the King*—strikes one as too sweeping. There is an audacious Elizabethan temper in this blank verse, and Milton, Keats, Arnold and the finest of Stephen Phillips are there as general influences much more than Tennyson.¹ Least of all is the mood or the manner of the *Idylls* dominant. The early Tennyson had great lyrical and descriptive power, but the poet of the *Idylls* has, in the main, a marked lack of intensity and is more absorbed in decorating and elaborating the obvious and mirroring the rather mawkish sentimentality and prudish respectability of the typical Victorian temperament than in expressing profound vision and emotion. A considerable skill in metre and rhythm is there, but, except on rare occasions, it is not wholly charged with poetic inspiration. Creative energy, whether puissant or delicate, is wanting, and in its place we have an adroit yet somewhat empty elegance that is not seldom on the verge of being musically-turned prose. These faults are precisely what are most absent from Sri Aurobindo's youthful blank verse. Even when a Tennysonian influence may be traced, it is just the passion and the poignancy and the true poetic tone that render him non-Tennysonian. Consider this passage of Tennyson's in the middle of the Enid-story:

¹ We may note, in passing, that C.R.M. is wrongly informed about Stephen Phillips having been at Cambridge with Sri Aurobindo. Phillips was in touch with the group at Cambridge and was a personal friend of Sri Aurobindo's elder brother, Manomohan Ghose, who knew also Oscar Wilde and had Laurence Binyon as a classmate.

O purblind race of miserable men,
 How many among us at this very hour
 Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves,
 By taking true for false, or false for true;
 Here, thro' the feeble twilight of this world
 Groping, how many, until we pass and reach
 That other, where we see as we are seen...

Put it side by side with the following, cited in my book, from Sri Aurobindo's *Love and Death*—part of a lament by a lover visiting the land of the dead—where to a superficial eye the Tennysonian influence may seem strong:

...O miserable race of men,
 With violent and passionate souls you come
 Foredoomed upon the earth and live brief days
 In fear and anguish, catching at stray beams
 Of sunlight, little fragrances of flowers;
 Then from your spacious earth in a great horror
 Descend into this night, and here too soon
 Must expiate your few inadequate joys.
 O bargain hard! Death helps us not. He leads
 Alarmed, all shivering from his chill embrace,
 The naked spirit here...

A world of difference behind the surface resemblance should be evident. Sri Aurobindo is all vibrant and sensitive, the poetry is unforced, unflogged, and though the art is consummate there is little of the deliberative and consciously constructive. Genuine vitality is the distinguishing mark of the nineteenth-century Sri Aurobindo just as it is of the twentieth-century one, and such vitality is the one thing that is mostly to seek in Tennyson of the *Idylls*. To look upon this Tennyson as “a

master of rhythm and a true delineator of beauty” is as serious a mistake as to see him cropping up in Sri Aurobindo.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “TRADITIONAL” AND “DERIVATIVE”

It would be rash to deny influences in *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*, the works of Sri Aurobindo’s youth. However, not only is the influence of the *Idylls* most faint, if at all, but also the other influences do not prevent the play of a fresh individual style reflecting an individual temperament and taking up the best of the blank-verse masters into a new creation with qualities all its own of beauty and power. Glance at these lines quoted in my book:

Snow on ravine, and snow on cliff, and snow
Sweeping in strenuous outlines to heaven,
With distant gleaming vales and turbulent rocks,
Giant precipices black-hewn and bold
Daring the universal whiteness...

Or take from my book the passage in which Pururavus paused
not on the plains nor on the foot-hills

But plunged o’er difficult gorge and prone ravine
And rivers thundering between dim walls,
Driven by immense desire, until he came
To dreadful silence of the peaks and trod
Regions as vast and lonely as his love.

That the blank verse should be nineteenth-century in certain respects was inevitable, since it belonged to that period; but this in itself is no fault at all. And to say that it has “many pleasant lines of a derivative nature” is both to be patronising out of turn and to be deficient in close and keen scrutiny. To

characterise as merely pleasant the poetic intensity that is Sri Aurobindo's is to be perilously near the level of the flapper who called the Himalayas "so sweet" and the Niagara Falls "so dinky". To talk of his being "derivative" is not only to forget the genius-touch that can make all shadows of past masters part of an entirely novel chiaroscuro but also to perpetrate a confusion between the derivative and the traditional. Sri Aurobindo's blank verse can be called traditional. But to be traditional is not to be debarred from originality and greatness. While being traditional, one can be, if one has the genius, as original and great as Homer, Virgil, Lucretius, Marlowe, Milton, Keats. An infinite diversity is possible within traditionalism, and numberless heights and depths of vision and emotion can be reached through traditional technique. There is quite an amount in the later work of Sri Aurobindo that breaks new ground in technique and also goes psychologically beyond the general source of poetry in the past; hence it cannot be dubbed altogether traditional. But wherever he is such, he is in the line of the masters, and, though I do not idolatrously accept everything written by Sri Aurobindo as being always "tops"¹, I consider the epithet "derivative" utterly misguided.

A SINGULAR OVERSIGHT AND A STRANGE INSENSITIVENESS

The particular quotation C.R.M. has made in this connection does not show Sri Aurobindo at his most typical. I admit that it is not one of his best moments. But apart from its being neither Tennysonianly "idyll"-ic in especial nor, in any distinguishable way, derivative, I should like to protest in the first

¹ C.R.M.'s use of Ben Jonson's expression "this side idolatry" is, as sometimes seen elsewhere too in modern literature, a misapplication of what the original context meant. Jonson, writing of Shakespeare, connoted by it that though he did honour Shakespeare he stopped short of making a god of him.

place that it is robbed of its own proper effect by a singular oversight by C.R.M. Can anyone make grammatical sense out of the line about lightning? Suspended solitarily in front of those about "all that blackness", it has neither point nor bearing. It acquires meaning and relevance only if we quote it together with a few preceding it and restore the mutilated passage thus:

...and with a roar of rain
And tumult on the wings of wind and clasp
Of the o'erwhelmed horizons and with bursts
Of thunder breaking all the body with sound
And lightning 'twixt the eyes intolerable,
Like heaven's vast eagle all that blackness swept
Down over the inferior snowless heights
And swallowed up the dawn.

In the second place, I should like to protest that C.R.M.'s stricture on the word '*twixt*' in the lightning-line is insensitive. He regards this word as horrible and calls it "a crutch for amateur versifiers". Strange that a word which can be found in all the best poets from Spenser downwards and which has nothing unpoetic about it except that twentieth-century poets do not frequently employ it should be criticised at just the place where it is most appropriate. When William Watson spoke of a time

Pendulous 'twixt the gold hour and the grey

he was certainly not propping himself in amateur versification: the word is subtly expressive of brief delicate suspension. Even more apt is it in Sri Aurobindo's line. Look at it carefully, listen to it attentively. Does it not carry the precise suggestion of lightning? The same reason that makes the word *blitz* so appropriate for lightning applies here.

Coming finally to the quotation which C.R.M. rightly judges to be first-rate—

Only he listens to the voice of his thoughts, his heart's
ignorant whisper,
 Whistle of wind in the tree-tops of time and the rustle of
Nature—

I may remark that it is not strictly a sample, as his description puts it, of blank verse. It is blank verse only in the sense that there are no rhymes. It is not pentametrical with an iambic base, as English blank verse is. It really illustrates the hexameter rhythm which Sri Aurobindo, shedding new light on quantitative prosody in English, achieves with striking inspired originality. To demonstrate this originality as well as the excellence of his blank verse and the remarkable revelatory force of his recent mystical poetry is the main aim of my book. C.R.M. has said hardly anything about my detailed treatment of my theme in this book, the patient careful critical analysis with which I have attempted to substantiate my thesis. Poetry is a "ticklish" affair and one must live with any poet's work a good deal and often with the help of somebody steeped in it, if one is to get over the surfaciness of the impression to which one is liable, what with the fads and fancies that are most at play in one's reactions when the impact on one is of something directed not at one's "rational" mind but at one's temperament and taste and instinct—factors which if one is not specifically trained to be catholic are likely to trip up even critics like Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold and Eliot. May I hope that C.R.M., whose writings are often acute as well as charming will give my book a closer reading and, instead of being in a hurry to pass judgment, open himself more sensitively, more discerningly, to the Aurobindonian inspiration?

II

(a)*

Mr. P. Lal has issued "A Testament for our Poets". He has some pointed and pertinent things to say, but he spoils their effect by falling foul rather violently of one about whom Francis Watson, in a recent broadcast on English Poetry from India, said that he was the one Indian poet whom Yeats had singled out as writing creatively in English. Yeats is well-known for his somewhat supercilious manner towards Indo-English poets: hence a comment like this from him has a rare value—particularly as he was himself one of the greatest contemporary poets in the English language. Mr. Lal seems to have been exceptionally unfortunate in his choice of Sri Aurobindo as a whipping-post.

His own personal preference is for "realistic poetry reflecting ...the din and hubbub, the confusion and indecision, the flashes of goodness and beauty of our age". There is nothing intrinsically objectionable in this *penchant*, provided it does not deprive one of response to other kinds of poetry. But there must be no particular philosophical shade attached to the word "realistic" as if poetry that is not a product of so-called "realism" were a dressing up of unreality. Art is out of touch with reality only when its expression is abstract or imprecise instead of in concrete and vivid terms. Reality, for art, is simply that which is real to the artist and which he can best seize in perfect form with concreteness and vividness.

WRONG APPROACH

Such a position is not altogether repudiated by Mr. Lal—in broad theory. But he has grave limitations of perception and

* This was published in *Mother India*, November 10, 1951, except that a few quotations have been changed.

sympathy, rendering his theory itself a little hazy, and he cannot help bringing into it his temperamental preferences. He reacts against romanticism on the one hand and "criticism of life" on the other. In condemning Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri* and warning Indian poets to keep away from the Aurobindonian brand of verse if they wish to do anything worth-while, he also betrays a most serious lack of response to spiritual poetry.

He, of course, protests that he cannot be considered totally unsympathetic to poetry of a spiritual order. "I can read," he says, "the *Divine Comedy* with pleasure, St. John of the Cross is a marvellous poet, poems of Kabir and Chandidas are exquisite. T.S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* is an excellent poem of spiritual tension, confusion and resolution which I can read with great enjoyment and recall with surprising accuracy and detail." Well, the protest is far from convincing. Dante was a first-rate religious poet, not a spiritual or mystic one; he was well-versed in theology, perfectly conversant with the living symbols of the Catholic creed, his imagination was finely and powerfully touched by religious fervour, but there never was any invasion of his consciousness by the super-conscious and he had not the temperament or the experience of the Saints who figure in his *Paradiso*. By the way, apart from certain portions, the *Divine Comedy* is not even directly religious poetry: only its setting is in terms of religion. T.S. Eliot also is in part an effective poet of religious feeling and idea: the tension, confusion and resolution in *Ash-Wednesday* are not spiritual in the true sense and they are more misty than mystic. Not that a state of mind is not infused into them but they give us neither the concreteness nor the intensity of spiritual vision and mystic experience. Mr. Lal's ignorance of this fact proves that he has no clear idea of spiritual poetry.

St. John of the Cross is a real mystic and in his poems there is the immediacy of inner contact with the Eternal. But they

are spiritual and mystic in a certain way—a highly personal devotion-coloured lyricism, deeply intense yet not charged with the powerful amplitude of vision and vibration such as we find in verses of the Upanishads, verses which seem to be the Infinite's own large and luminous language. Kabir and Chandidas are somewhat in the same category, though with a difference of tone and temper. They are indeed, as Mr. Lal says, exquisite and they are authentically spiritual, but again more intense than immense and the masterful mantric expression is not theirs. If Mr. Lal responds to St. John of the Cross and to these two Indian singers he is not without all spiritual sympathy; still, he cannot be said to show any sensitiveness to the kind of inspiration that is *Savitri*. We are not surprised that he fails to appreciate it.

POETIC COMMUNICATION

Here we are likely to have a couple of paragraphs from his own article thrown at our heads by him. He has written: "The job of all poetry is to convey an experience which the reader has not himself experienced but to which he is made sympathetic by the rhythm, linguistic precision and incantation of the poem he is reading.... The good poem must be able to communicate an emotion to me even when I have only the faintest intellectual, and no emotional, idea of what that emotion is."

But surely there must be something in the reader to serve as a *point d'appui* for the poet's effort at communication? Else we shall be obliged to reject *Lycidas* as no poetry because Dr. Johnson found it crude and unmelodious, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* as sheer metricised prose because Jeffreys remarked, "This will never do", Shelley's work as valueless because Matthew Arnold shook his head about it, Swinburne's early lyrics as meretricious stuff because Morley castigated them

ruthlessly. And, mind you, these were no small and narrow critics on the whole. If they could have a blind spot in their critical retina and prove unreliable on occasion, Mr. Lal who is obviously restricted in his general sympathies and semi-perceptive of the spiritual light in poetry can hardly hope to impress us by his statement: "When I read any passage from Sri Aurobindo's 'epics' a sick-as-stale-lemonade shiver gallops up and down my spine at a rate impossible to compute"—or by his description of *Savitri*-like verse as "greasy, weak-spined and purple-adjectived poetry", "a loose expression of a loose emotion"—or by his warning that unless poets like him band together and produce a Manifesto "there is every likelihood that the blurred, rubbery and airy sentiments of a Sri Aurobindo will slowly clog our own poetry".

SPIRITUAL VISION AND PHILOSOPHY

One point we may grant the preposterous Mr. Lal. If poets like him tried to write in Sri Aurobindo's vein without any of the Aurobindonian discipline of consciousness and mystical drive of the inner being, they might very well turn out in verse a painted anaemia of pseudo-spirituality. Spiritual poetry cannot be written on the cheap, but that does not mean that what Sri Aurobindo writes answers to Mr. Lal's designation of *Savitri*. *Prima facie*, a master of spiritual experience, with a consummate knowledge of the English language (Sri Aurobindo was educated from his seventh to his twenty-first year in England), is not likely to pen feverishly feeble inanities and pass them off as mysticism. If he is in addition an intellectual and a philosopher of giant proportions, all the less probable is it that his mystical expression should be greasy and weak-spined and purple-adjectived. At his worst he might be in danger of seeming elusive and esoteric or else remote and recondite. Mr. Lal's

terms are absolutely irrelevant and incorrect.

One cannot tax with either gaudiness or prettification Sri Aurobindo's revelatory glimpses of Supernature:

The ways that lead to endless happiness
Ran like dream-smiles through meditating vasts:
Disclosed stood up in a gold moment's blaze
White sun-steppes in the pathless Infinite.

Nor can we accuse of empty effusiveness his packed profound depiction of what man in his ignorance of the meaning of his life and of his high and splendid fate never sees in the dynamics of world-history:

Only the Immortals on their deathless heights...
Can see the Idea, the Might that change Time's course,
Come maned with light from undiscovered worlds,
Hear, while the world toils on with its deep blind heart,
The galloping hooves of the unforeseen event,
Bearing the superhuman rider, near
And, impassive to earth's din and startled cry,
Return to the silence of the hills of God;
As lightning leaps, as thunder sweeps, they pass
And leave their mark on the trampled breast of Life.

Nor is there any pompous vacuity in his suggestive conjuration of the strange fugitive experience to which the brain opens itself as it pauses at times between an unknown above and an unknown below and feels

Touched by the thoughts that skim the fathomless surge
Of Nature and wing back to hidden shores—

or in that phrase about the divinised consciousness's vivid play of self-disclosure within its universal oneness:

Idea rotated symphonies of sight,
Sight was a flame-throw from identity.

All this is pure spiritual vision which seems to have made little impression on Mr. Lal during his reading of *Savitri*. But *Savitri* is spiritual philosophy as well as spiritual vision, and Mr. Lal is equally at sea with a poetry that fuses the philosophical concept with mystic symbolism and revelation. Else how could he miss the concreteness and vividness of a large-idea'd utterance like:

Original and supernal Immanence
Of which all Nature's process is the art,
The cosmic Worker set his secret hand
To turn this frail mud-engine to heaven-use.
A Presence wrought behind the ambiguous screen:
It beat his soil to bear a Titan's weight,
Refining half-hewn blocks of natural strength
It built his soul into a statued God.
The Craftsman of the magic stuff of self
Who labours at his high and difficult plan
In the wide workshop of the wonderful world,
Modelled in inward Time his rhythmic parts.

Or take the following philosophically spiritual lines:

Even were caught as through a cunning veil
The smile of love that sanctions the long game,
The calm indulgence and maternal breasts
Of Wisdom suckling the child-laughter of Chance,

Silence the nurse of the Almighty's power,
The omniscient hush, womb of the immortal Word,
And of the Timeless the still brooding face,
And the creative eye of Eternity.

Or consider a passage like this—an example of something that occurs very frequently in *Savitri*—about earth's aspiration and her future fulfilment:

An inarticulate whisper drives her steps
Of which she feels the force but not the sense;
A few rare intimations come as guides,
Immense divining flashes cleave her brain...
A vision meets her of supernal Powers
That draw her as if mighty kinsmen lost
Approaching with estranged great luminous gaze...
Outstretching arms to the unconscious Void,
Passionate she prays to invisible forms of Gods
Soliciting from dumb Fate and toiling Time
What most she needs, what most exceeds her scope,
A Mind unvisited by illusion's gleams,
A Will expressive of soul's deity,
A Strength not forced to stumble by its speed,
A Joy that drags not sorrow as its shade.
For these she yearns and feels them destined hers:
Heaven's privilege she claims as her own right.
Just is her claim the all-witnessing Gods approve,
Clear in a greater light than reason owns:
Our intuitions are its title-deeds;
Our souls accept what our blind thoughts refuse.
Earth's winged chimeras are Truth's steeds in Heaven,
The impossible God's sign of things to be.

It would really be a critical apocalypse if one could learn from Mr. Lal where in any of these magnificent excerpts is a stale-lemonade quality or a riot of blurred, airy and rubbery sentiments. One might as well look for an orgy of purple adjectives, or weak-spined greasiness, or loose emotion loosely expressed, in the profound-sighted and high-thoughted *slokas* of the Gita. Transposed to the plane of spiritual vision and spiritual philosophy, illumined and enlarged in the consciousness of a seer-sage, all that Mr. Lal demands of a true poem is here in abundance: “a choreographical pattern within a state of tension produced in a refined sensibility”—“language used precisely, nobly and with a sense of purpose.”

UNJUST CRITICISM

To be sure, the whole of *Savitri* is not uniformly inspired, but that is natural. In a long epic narrative in which a story is unfolded or a sequence of experiences developed, inspiration has to build sober bridges, so to speak, between the glories of its dramatic moments. Even Dante who is more uniformly inspired in his *Divine Comedy* than most of the other great epic poets has his slightly relaxed periods. And as for Homer in the *Iliad* and Milton in *Paradise Lost*, they either nod or plod on occasion and still remain mighty names in the roll of poetry.

Even when the verse is not a sober bridge between the glories of dramatic moments, there is bound to be in a poem of considerable length and ample range of subject an inequality in the expression. What we have to appreciate in *Savitri* is the rareness of the inequality and the presence of some authentic minimum of inspiration in the passages where the afflatus tends to sink. According to Mr. Lal, there is no authentic inspiration of any kind in the following:

All there was soul or made of sheer soul-stuff:
 A sky of soul covered a deep soul-ground.
 All here was known by a spiritual sense:
 Thought was not there but a knowledge near and one
 Seized on all things by a moved identity...
 Life was not there but an impassioned force
 Finer than fineness, deeper than the deeps,
 Felt as a subtle and spiritual power,
 A quivering out from soul to answering soul,
 A mystic movement, a close influence,
 A free and happy and intense approach
 Of being to being with no screen or check,
 Without which life and love could never have been.
 Body was not there, for bodies were needed not,
 The soul itself was its own deathless form
 And met at once the touch of other souls
 Close, blissful, concrete, wonderfully true...

Well, can we say to Mr. Lal: "You are right for at least once"?

I am sorry that even this concession is out of the question.
 Read without prejudice, the passage for all its comparative
 inferiority has nothing to sicken us. There is a balanced sys-
 tematic development of the theme of soul-stuff being all, and
 the lines—

Thought was not there but a knowledge near and one
 Seized on all things by a moved identity—

cannot be bettered for accurate expression in a certain style.
 The phrase "near and one" is particularly pregnant for any alert
 intellect and the word "seized" is concrete and vivid as is also
 the word "moved": a suggestive picture of a knowing by means
 of a closeness of things to one another because of an intensely

felt unity of being, which proves thought-knowledge a cold superficiality and an utter superfluity, comes before the inner sense. The lines that provoke Mr. Lal to the utmost sarcasm are—

Life was not there but an impassioned force
Finer than fineness, deeper than the deeps...

The second line is an echo of a turn we find at times in some Upanishads, it is a sort of paradoxical pointing of extremes and is not devoid of attractiveness or effectiveness: here it is particularly apt because the soul, in Yogic realisation, is the inmost entity of the inner world and the subtlest of all subtle forces. The first line is deemed by Mr. Lal an attempt at Miltonese which succeeds in being mere wind. He is mistaken in both respects. Miltonese is more packed in turn, more grandiose in language, less direct in suggestion and inclines towards a deliberate balance of emphasised idea: it might convert the line into something like

Life absent, save impassioned force be life.

Sri Aurobindo here has a straightforward style and statement expressing the truth that on an occult “plane” where Soul is the determining principle there is a pure essence of vitality in both its ardent and its dynamic aspects, rather than what we know as Life Force. Of course, these lines and all the rest of the passage would hardly make an impact on a reader who has allowed the glib use of the word “soul” by wishy-washy and vacuous sentimentalists or by pseudo-mystics to spoil his stomach for it. Still less would an impact occur if a reader has from the very beginning no feel of what the soul could be like and looks upon every mention of it as a gaseous falsehood. Mr.

Lal labours under a serious deficiency of soul-sense. Most non-mystic readers are somewhat in the same case, but not all lack as completely a sympathetic instinct for something which to the mystic is more “close, blissful, concrete, wonderfully true” (a phrase, by the way, very felicitously worded and rhythmmed) than even his bodily existence. Mr. Lal himself says *vis-à-vis* the passage : “I see nothing, there is nothing I can hang on to.” This could just as well be because of his own clinging to the surface mentality as because of the supposed want of poetry in the lines.

Not that Sri Aurobindo is here at his best. But if we admit that Sri Aurobindo is here perhaps at his worst we still pay him a tremendous compliment. For the lines, by their harmonious significance and word and rhythm, remain poetry for all their falling below such bursts of inspiration as we quoted earlier—and even those examples cannot provide a really adequate notion of the sustained splendour *Savitri* has to offer nor of the huge variety of poetic merit in it, passages of a spiritualised “natural magic” and mysticised “human interest” as well as Yogicised philosophy and direct occult insight into the individual and the cosmos. Yes, the lines remain poetry and become more poetic when taken in their proper context as part of a fuller record in which is set alive before us an actual experience of the plane of the World-Soul. Terms like “soul-stuff” and “sky of soul” and “deep soul-ground” acquire a degree of concrete meaning that cannot arise when the passage is torn from what goes before and comes after and when no indication is supplied of the totality of which it is an integral and almost inseparable portion.

Mr. Lal does injustice to the passage by the way he has presented it and the attitude he adopts towards it. But the worst crime he commits against the critic’s office is to choose from Sri Aurobindo a passage that is not plenarily Aurobindonian, and

declare it to be all that Sri Aurobindo is capable of throughout the nearly thirteen thousand lines published in Volume I of *Savitri* which has been available to Mr. Lal. This is an act of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*, betraying a want of scruple added to limitation of aesthesis. No doubt, *Savitri* is not always easy to appreciate, it is mostly a new kind of poetry with a vision and language caught as if directly from hidden heights and depths and breadths of a more than human consciousness. Sri Aurobindo himself felt that it would take time to obtain wide recognition. But for an unprejudiced reader of quick, supple and penetrating imagination there is enough in it of recognisable excellence to win for its author the richest laurels—especially among his countrymen who may be expected to respond more readily to a sovereign spiritual utterance.

If, however, every Indian reader turns out to be like Mr. Lal I can only sigh and quote two lines—“a state of tension produced in a refined sensibility” and “language used precisely, nobly and with a sense of purpose”, I suppose— from one of Mr. Lal’s own recent and definitely non-Aurobindonian poems:

Here in dejection
I don’t know what to do.

(b)★

Fearing lest Mr. Lal should miss my criticism of him I took care to send him a copy of the issue of *Mother India* which had featured my attack. He was kind enough to acknowledge it and give consideration to that piece in a letter (November 22, 1951) from Calcutta:

Dear Mr. Sethna:

Thank you for sending me your rejoinder to my article on

* Based on a feature in *Mother India*, October, 1968.

modern Indo-Anglian poets in the *Sunday Standard*. There was a time when *Mother India* used to be sold here regularly, but now I fail to find it on the news-stands; and if you hadn't forwarded me a copy I might very well have missed your interesting objections and counter-arguments.

I am flattered that you should think my remarks worth two lengthy pages of reply. To speak the truth, I brought in the poetry of Sri Aurobindo chiefly as a sidelight; my main purpose was to set a system of rules and methods which I hoped would be helpful in encouraging the present efflorescence in our poetry and giving it a sense of direction and sureness.

I think I made it fairly clear from the very beginning that whatever I said was in no way as assertion of dogmatic belief; I divided poetry-appreciating people into two sorts, those who could derive what they thought was "poetic" satisfaction from the poetry of Sri Aurobindo and those who, for various reasons, the chief perhaps being an imperfect training in the enjoyment of spiritual poetry, could not. In spite of your many cogent arguments and very level-headed attempt to puncture my thesis, I am still a member of the group which cannot find pleasure in Sri Aurobindo. If this were taken to mean that I condemn people who do, my ignorance would be shamefully evident. Nowhere in my article did I try to determine or standardize taste; I was advocating a policy for our poets which might help them to crystallize their productions into a poetic school, which I thought was urgently needed if the Indo-Anglian revival was to remain a revival and not fizzle out in a diffuse display of eccentric sparks.

This kind of argument could carry on for ever, and justification is always a somewhat hateful process anyway. I hope nevertheless that you will permit me a few words, if not to justify my remarks (if they are worth anything, time will justify them; if they aren't, I wouldn't like to play hypocrite), at least

to clear up a few points that have arisen in the course of your rejoinder.

It is quite possible that I may have “a blind spot on my critical retina” when I chastise Sri Aurobindo, but this should in no way invalidate my argument that the job of all good poetry is to communicate an emotion to the reader even when he has no emotional and only the faintest intellectual idea of what that emotion is. That was the way I was educated to many kinds and strata of emotion not available in our humdrum petit-bourgeois family; and my experience (and those of my friends) is where I start from. You protest that the reader must have some point of contact for the poet to touch. But of course. The reader is a passive radio set on which many wavelengths are contacted and received; but you do not understand Bangkok or Teheran. The wavelength’s job is to be communicable; if I find I cannot make head or tail of Sri Aurobindo or Wallace Stevens, I think I am within my rights to push on to a greener pasture. Perhaps if I spent time on Sri Aurobindo, I might pick up something. But you cannot compel that from me.

I am afraid it is not quite right to say that “a master of spiritual experience, with a consummate knowledge of the English language (Sri Aurobindo was educated from his seventh to his twenty-first year in England), is not likely to pen feverishly feeble inanities and pass them off as mysticism”. Spiritual experience means nothing (like all other experience) unless it can be precisely communicated to a person not acquainted with it. To imply that fourteen years in England are likely to give a person a mastery of the English language, would seem to ignore the fact that there are Englishmen who have spent lifetimes in England without being able to improve their grammar to the extent of writing a letter to the Editor of *Picture Post*. Consummate knowledge of a language may be a very dangerous thing sometimes, especially for a poet. If knowledge were all,

every leader-writer would be a poet. The essential thing is to get to *feel* a language in a kind of disciplined debauch. Finally, you imply that I condemn Sri Aurobindo for deliberately palming off poetic hypocrisy. This is absurd. Though I have no gauge to judge the genuineness of Sri Aurobindo's mysticism, I think it is fair and reasonable to say that he was a sincere mystic, perhaps a profound mystic. But that does not *ipso facto* turn him into a correspondingly profound poet.

Thank you for your stimulating criticism. I hope our differences on poetic matters do not stand in the way of a cordial personal relationship.

You may publish this letter if you like.

Very sincerely,
P. LAL

Here was evidently a call for a second rejoinder, which did make its way from Bombay to its target, though a trifle belatedly (December 20, 1951):

Dear Mr. Lal,

I received your letter on the eve of my departure to Pondicherry. Once there, I did not feel like entering into any correspondence. Now I am back and, with part of the work on *Mother India* disposed of, I turn to your criticism of my rejoinder. I am sorry you have had to wait three weeks or more.

Your letter is, to my mind, a much more dignified and genuine document than your article, though even in my counter-attack I have not refused to grant that you had some pointed and pertinent things to say on poetry in general and Indo-Anglian poetry in particular. If what you say now had been all your thesis, I don't think I would have plunged into a defence of Sri Aurobindo. The one impression I carried away from your article was precisely that you were making an assertion of dog-

matic belief. At the start you record just your own violent reaction against *Savitri*; but a little later you say something which is exactly the opposite of your present statement that people who do not derive poetic satisfaction from Sri Aurobindo's epic fail chiefly because of an imperfect training in the enjoyment of spiritual poetry. You actually try to prove that you are quite competent to pass judgment on spiritual poetry: you list your qualifications by commenting favourably on Dante, Eliot, St. John of the Cross, Kabir and Chandidas. The suggestion is unmistakable: Sri Aurobindo is a poetic failure and not merely a poet to whom you are allergic. It is this suggestion that drew my fire.

I do not for a moment deny what you write about poetic communication. It is indeed the job of the poet to convey his experience or vision with effective art. But just because you cannot kindle up to a certain kind of poetry you have no right to vilify it. You have only the right to set it aside (if you are not inclined to make an effort to be catholic). You may push on to what is for you a greener pasture, with a shrug of your shoulders signifying that the stuff you are leaving behind may be very good yet is barren land to you. You cannot talk of merely different tastes and in the same breath pontificate as if from an absolute standard.

Even with regard to "tastes" your division of readers into two classes is rather dogmatic. There are hundreds who can appreciate all that moves you and at the same time relish Sri Aurobindo. Take me, for instance. I can read with pleasure the type of poetry you favour, without losing one bit of my intense delight in *Savitri*. You represent a rather small class which has allowed some obscure prejudice to colour its judgment. There seems almost to be some perversity at work, eager to run down somebody who, some instinct tells one, is truly great. C.R.M. seldom lets an opportunity go by of having a fling at Sri

Aurobindo's poetry, whether earlier or later, without ever having taken the trouble to read him sufficiently. If you look at my rejoinder to a comment made apropos of my book on Sri Aurobindo's blank verse, hexameters and recent mystical poems, you will be surprised to see how ignorant as well as wrong-headed he was at every turn. Some time back Tambimuttu, to illustrate bad English by Indians, pronounced that there was a sentence of Sri Aurobindo's which simply screamed out for correction. He just couldn't help picking on a writer whose English even Englishmen had highly praised. As Tambi did not quote the sentence in question, I had no means of finding out whether he was making much of a printer's devil or of a slip such as is possible even to a great writer in a hurry or merely colliding with a usage beyond him. You, I am sure, have no more than a perfunctory acquaintance with *Savitri*—and yet you don't hesitate to be cleverly nasty about it. But I must say that you were not very clever when, on the strength of the supposed "loose emotion loosely expressed" of one short passage wrenched out of its context, you tried to insinuate that the nearly thirteen thousand published lines of *Savitri*, Vol.I, were a sickening staleness!

You are a man of considerable talent. I have read several poems of yours and they are not all of the flat quality of the two lines I have quoted at the end of my article to hoist you with your own petard of non-Aurobindonian poetic technique. If you really can't stand Sri Aurobindo after reading enough of him, one can't help you—much less compel you to like him. But I do regret the "blind spot". You would add much to your critical sensitivity if you could feel even a little of the gigantic inspiration that has given us this epic which can rank in value with creations like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* on the one hand and on the other the Rigveda and the Upanishads.

What I regret more is that even in the present letter you do

not quite rest with stating that Sri Aurobindo does not appeal to you. The tendency to summon arguments attempting to show that he is worthless is not absent. Just look at your line of thought about knowledge of English. Englishmen who spend lifetimes in their own country may still remain unable to improve their grammar to the extent of penning a letter to *Picture Post*. But Indians who spend in England fourteen of their most formative years in the direct study of English and pass through Cambridge with distinction and show an undeniably extraordinary capacity to master difficult languages like Greek and Latin are not liable to be in the same case. Your reasoning is patently twisted, if you'll forgive my being blunt. Secondly, I never said that consummate knowledge of English is by itself enough to make one a poet. You are arguing with a dummy of your own invention. If you will look again at the sentence of mine which you have quoted, you will mark that I am pointing out the unlikelihood of a vacuous pseudo-mysticism being penned and palmed off as the genuine article by a Master of Yoga who brings to his self-expression an expert intimacy with the English language. This is something quite different and contains sound sense. I agree that the essential thing is, as you put it in a memorable phrase, to get to *feel* a language in a kind of disciplined debauch—but surely consummate knowledge of a tongue is not inapt to conduce to such a debauch. In fact, the knowledge cannot really be consummate without the feel you have in mind. I wonder how you can speak of ordinary leader-writers being consummate in knowledge : they are no more than efficient at their best.

I had no intention to charge you with considering Sri Aurobindo a bogus mystic—though I shouldn't be amazed if you did consider him such, for you appear to have no idea of the wonderful spiritual personality that he was or of the perfect blend of illumination and intellect that his philosophical or other

expositions are. If you had an idea, would you so easily miss seeing how that sentence of mine could imply only that Sri Aurobindo with his qualifications, both spiritual and literary, would naturally be a sufficient critic to himself and would know if by any chance he wrote anything misty instead of mystic?

I appreciate the courtesy of your letter. I like the way you have taken my criticism and the broadness of thought that makes you hope our differences on poetic matters may not stand against a cordial personal relationship.

Sincerely yours,
K. D. SETHNA

It would be ungracious on my part to omit the short note (December 24. 1951) I received from Mr. Lal.

My dear Mr. Sethna,

Thank you for your letter of the 20th.

Arguments like ours can be prolonged interminably, and what we ultimately reach may be simply—and not very regrettably—an agreement to differ.

It is Christmas now and hatchets are best buried. May I extend to you my sincerest wishes for a Happy Christmas and New Year? I shall in 1952 read *Savitri* with greater care, in order to cultivate a more perfect sympathy for it.

Very sincerely,
P. Lal

(c)

It is very doubtful whether Mr. Lal carried out his pious resolve. For, his prejudices do not appear to have essentially diminished, though they are within a somewhat changed framework. He has recently brought out a big book, *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*, partly to refute another critic, Buddhadeva Bose. In *The Concise Encyclopaedia of English and American Poets and Poetry*, edited by Stephen

Spender and Donald Hall (1963), Bose levelled in effect the charge of rootlessness, incompetence and mediocrity against the sort of work Mr. Lal favours and practises. Bose's thesis was: "the best of Indian-English verse belongs to the nineteenth century, when Indians came nearest to 'speaking, thinking and dreaming in English'. In authenticity of diction and feeling Sri Aurobindo far outshines the others, but Toru Dutt's charming pastiche still holds some interest. As for present-day 'Indo-Anglians', they are earnest and not without talent, but it is difficult to see how they can develop as poets in a language which they have learnt from books and seldom hear spoken in the streets or even in their own houses, and whose two great sources lie beyond the seven seas."

Mr. Lal has several excellent things to say on the creative role of English in India at the present day no less than in the nineteenth century. Bose appears to have tilted the balance too roughly, too sweepingly. But Mr. Lal fails to cut an effective figure in any other respect. His reaction to Bose on Sri Aurobindo is: "I am struck dumb by this fatuous remark. If Mr. Bose thinks Sri Aurobindo 'far outshines the others' in 'authenticity of diction and feeling', he is entitled to his opinion—but should he put it down in an encyclopaedia for all the world to see?"

First, Mr. Lal is under the delusion that Bose's compliment to Sri Aurobindo in *The Concise Encyclopaedia* is a crazy one-man opinion or, at most, the view of a hopeless minority. Not that big battalions in themselves count, or that an encyclopaedia should be partisan in spirit. But such a book is surely the right place for a critical stance shared by many who can claim at least as much literary training and experience as Mr. Lal. Even within his own clique, G. S. Sharat Chandra ranks Sri Aurobindo among great writers, R. de L. Furtado finds his poetry impressive and S. R. Mokashi-Punekar manages both to

contradict Bose and to outdo him in eulogy : “Why is Sri Aurobindo 19th-century please: I admire Sri Aurobindo. If I were more courageous and had the necessary genius, I would have tried to imitate him.”

Secondly, Mr. Lal and his band of Post-Independence poets have not gauged the proper import of Bose’s remark on Sri Aurobindo. Bose is referring to the nineteenth-century writers and it is in relation to them that he considers Sri Aurobindo as excelling everybody. Next to Sri Aurobindo he fancies Toru Dutt. He is not directly bearing on “present-day ‘Indo-Anglians’ ”, whom he groups separately. Mr. Lal *et al.* should really have no grudge against Bose within the universe of discourse where the comparative estimate was made. Do they contend that Sri Aurobindo is inferior in authenticity of diction and feeling to Toru Dutt and the rest of the nineteenth-century poets?

It is not directly but indirectly that Bose puts down Mr. Lal *et al.* Inasmuch as the latter are not even rated successful wielders of the English tongue in its poetic aspect they fall under Bose’s censure. Here they are lumped as inferior to all the good nineteenth-century poets, not only to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo, being the best of those poets in Bose’s eyes, turns out to be the greatest exceller of these inferior writers. The terms of the condemnation are somewhat different in their posture from the over-touchy belief of the Lilians about them. However, apart from the lack of subtle perception in the matter, the Lilians are right in opining that Bose sets them lower than Sri Aurobindo. Actually, if Bose were comparing them with him, his compliment to Sri Aurobindo would not prove, in the world of his values, very laudatory in itself. For when he deems them so insignificant, Sri Aurobindo’s greatness could very easily be no more than relative : he might well be a Triton among the minnows.

Not that Bose himself does anything less than hold him in high respect. And that really is the head and front of his offence to Mr. Lal. But Mr. Lal is not so brash today as he was in the past. In spite of the word “fatuous” to which he is provoked *vis-à-vis* Bose, he has come to a sort of specious compromise about *Savitri*. He writes:

“I realise that I may be charged, among the brighter and still wrathful younger groups of ‘Indo-Anglians’ with critical flabbiness and senility. What K. Raghavendra Rao said of Buckenham’s *Paolo and Francesca* (included in this volume) in a letter to Kewlian Sio in 1950—‘self-consciously literary and needlessly verbose; some good lines, yes, but the whole is verbose’—might be said of Sri Aurobindo also, but a fairer perspective is now called for.

“My private quarrel with Sri Aurobindo’s technical abilities and philosophical system has nothing to do with the recognition of his importance as a guru. He is the only modern poet, in any Indian language, to have attempted the large philosophical poem.... I still find reason to complain of the nebulous images, and think that the iambic pentameter fashioned by Sri Aurobindo to be weak-spined for most purposes. But there is a real attempt towards moulding a new verse form, and there is an admirable manner of philosophically transforming the *Savitri* story in the *Mahābhārata*. The failure of a Titan is still cause for sorrow and awe, and in such failure, as distinct from petty losses, lie seeds of fruition later. *Savitri* is the work of a poet steeped in the Greek and Latin classics who realised, as he put it, that ‘the nineteenth century in India was imitative, self-forgetful, artificial’. It aimed, he added, ‘at a successful reproduction of Europe in India’, forgetting that ‘death in one’s own dharma is better; it is a dangerous thing to follow the law of another’s nature’. Such a death brings new birth; ‘success in an alien path means only successful suicide’. *Savitri* is a great Pyrrhic victory.”

It is not easy to make out Mr. Lal's meaning. One inclines to adapt K. Raghavendra Rao: "some good phrases, yes, but the whole is verbose." What is the sense of disapproving "Sri Aurobindo's technical abilities" and of thinking "the iambic pentameter fashioned by Sri Aurobindo to be weak-spined for most purposes" and then turning round to say: "there is a real attempt towards moulding a new verse form"? Again, how are we to manage in the same breath Mr. Lal's "private quarrel with Sri Aurobindo's...philosophical system" and his declaration not only that Sri Aurobindo alone among modern Indian poets has attempted the large philosophical poem but also that "there is an admirable manner of philosophically transforming the Savitri story in the *Mahābhārata*"? One seems to move through sludge trying to grasp all that roundabout talk on death in one's own dharma being better than life in another's and on *Savitri*'s being such a death rather than the nineteenth-century's "imitative, self-forgetful, artificial" life, and on Sri Aurobindo's being a Titan whose failure and death in *Savitri* brings a new birth or, alternatively, whose great victory in this poem is achieved at a tremendous cost and so is a great defeat as well. Further, what is the point of the statement that the realisation of the nineteenth-century's imitativeness, self-forgetfulness and artificiality by Sri Aurobindo who was a poet steeped in the Greek and Latin classics lay at the back of the writing of *Savitri*? Does it suggest that in *Savitri* the Greek and Latin classics are at work along with a break-away from the nineteenth-century's defects? Or are those defects equivalent to one's being steeped in the classics of Greece and Rome as were the Europeans of the nineteenth-century whose dharma the Indians eagerly adopted? We fumble and stumble in all this crammed and mixed-up endeavour to give Sri Aurobindo something with one hand and take it away with the other. If any piece of writing which purports to come

to a conclusion can be called a Pyrrhic victory, this is it.

Pyrrhic essentially because the reader does not quite know where he stands and especially because what remains over in the reader's mind are words like: "the large philosophical poem", "moulding a new verse form", "an admirable manner of philosophically transforming the Savitri story", "a Titan", "awe", "seeds of fruition". Evidently Mr. Lal feels somewhere in himself that an epic of nearly 24,000 lines cannot just be ignored or bypassed. And, reading on in Mr. Lal's Introduction, we come across some light on the positive side of that see-saw passage. He says: "Toru Dutt..., Sarojini Naidu, and Sri Aurobindo—whatever their weaknesses—have this great strength in common though in varying degrees: they have Indian responses to life and things." And also a little before those zigzag asseverations, against which their author anticipated a charge of "critical flabbiness and senility" from even his own followers, we have a ray of illumination: "very recently there has been a feeling that the work of Sri Aurobindo and others of the 'mystic school' needs perhaps to be revalued instead of dismissed cursorily."

It would seem to be in deference to a slowly growing national sense of Sri Aurobindo's greatness not only as a spiritual figure but also as the poet of a spirituality which is Indian without ceasing to be integral that Mr. Lal is moved to make some concessions. His own personal attitude appears to be basically the same as before, looking askance at what he terms in one place even now "the stilted mystic-incense style of Sri Aurobindo". And equally unchanged is the ineptitude of his fault-finding. Take the criticism that Sri Aurobindo's "real attempt towards moulding a new verse-form" has still resulted in an "iambic pentameter ...weak-spined for most purposes"? Has Mr. Lal ever sought to see this "verse-form" in the concrete, definite and restricted terms Sri Aurobindo has employed? In a letter to me in 1933 Sri Aurobindo wrote:

“*Savitri*...is blank verse without enjambment (except rarely)—each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movement, so far as that is a possibility in English. You can’t take that as a model—it is too difficult a rhythm-structure to be a model. I shall know whether it is a success or not, only when I have finished two or three books.”

For such a model the technical requirements have been clearly put down by Sri Aurobindo in another letter:

“The things I lay most stress on...are whether each line in itself is the inevitable thing not only as a whole but in each word; whether there is the right distribution of sentence lengths (an immensely important thing in this kind of blank verse); whether the lines are in their right place, for all the lines may be perfect, but they may not combine perfectly together—bridges may be needed, alterations of position so as to create the right development and perspective etc., etc. Pauses hardly exist in this kind of blank verse; variation of rhythm as between the lines, of caesura, of the distribution of long and short, clipped and open syllables, manifold constructions of vowel and consonant sounds, alliteration, assonances, etc., distribution into one line, two line, three or four or five line, many line sentences, care to make each line tell by itself in its own mass and force and at the same time form a harmonious whole sentence—these are the important things.... I may add that the technique does not go by any set mental rule—for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precept but sound-significance filling out the word-significance. If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rule.”

To dismiss this kind of special iambic pentameter as “weak-spined”—an expression which must have a technical sense or is worth nothing—and to imagine it to be meant for “most

purposes” argues a critical mind content with blanket phraseology and not caring to attend to significant formal *minutiae*. So the mention of “my private quarrel with Sri Aurobindo’s technical abilities” is meaningless.

As for the quarrel with Sri Aurobindo’s “philosophical system”, it can only connote—in distinction from the “admirable manner of philosophically transforming the Savitri story”—that Mr. Lal finds incongenial the type of mysticism or spirituality which Sri Aurobindo has systematically worked out as a philosophy. In the context of poetic problems the quarrel is irrelevant—neither here nor there.

What remains, then? Only “the stilted mystic-incense style” and the “nebulous images”. Here, all that Mr. Lal has so far produced as justification for himself is that ancient citation of his of 17 lines out of *Savitri*’s 23,800 and odd. Even at the time he picked them out he was not unaware of objections and he has tried to meet them: “The reader now may have misunderstood me altogether, and started to say: ‘It’s all very well for you to puncture a specific passage, especially a passage dealing with spiritual vision and realisation. Don’t you see that states of ecstasy and beatitude are hardest to communicate to a person who has not passed through identical spiritual experiences?’” The answer he provides is no more than that a poem’s “rhythm, linguistic precision and incantation” must be such as to communicate even the most uncommon states—and “Sri Aurobindo does not satisfy me on this basic level”. Well, suppose the passage in question does lack in “rhythm, linguistic precision and incantation”: still, how would Mr. Lal be justified in pushing away the gigantic whole of *Savitri* on the strength of a minuscule part of it? Nowhere does he come to grips with the reader’s query on this head.

Mr. Lal’s criticism on every count is patently inadequate, patently prejudiced—a personal allergy and nothing else. And

when we come to the issue raised by his inclusion of two poems of Sri Aurobindo's in his own anthology, what do we realise? Mentioning Sri Aurobindo and five other poets in whose favour he has relaxed the chronological principle of including "only poems written after 1947", he tells us: "The poems selected from their works show 'modernism', and since four died after Independence and two are still with us, I felt that some idea should be given of the change in idiom and feeling that was beginning to make itself felt some time before the first major 'modern' spearhead launched itself in the years 1947-1950."

In the first place, does the selection evince any guiding sense of revaluing the Aurobindonian "mystic school"? In the second, is it actuated by a recognition of "Indian responses to life and things"? Out of the two poems one most amusingly pillories modern materialism and its egregious theories about man's mind and soul and its rash playing about with nuclear energy. No directly mystical element is there and the sole Indianism is an allusion to the Bo-tree in the midst of four allusions from which three touch on European things: the epics of Homer, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Napoleon's career. The other poem is wittily quizzical about a cat. There just one phrase—"fur-footed Brahman"—brings India in. And that phrase too is not exactly a key-expression. On the score of the non-mysticism and the non-Indianism of the poems chosen, I suppose we are expected to believe that we are forced on to them because not only *Savitri* but also the vast corpus of the remainder of Sri Aurobindo's poems and plays can supply nothing at all of revaluable mysticism and desirable Indianism suiting a "modern" mind. What we really come to see is simply that Mr. Lal is either unacquainted with Sri Aurobindo's voluminous output or totally biased and therefore unable to spot for his ends even "some good lines" which he has theoretically granted.

Now we may face the “modernism” said to be making itself felt some time before the Lilians brought it to a focus soon after Independence. Let us look at the poems in full:

A DREAM OF SURREAL SCIENCE¹

One dreamed and saw a gland write *Hamlet*, drink
 At the Mermaid, capture immortality;
 A committee of hormones on the Aegean's brink
 Composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

A thyroid, meditating almost nude
 Under the Bo-tree, saw the eternal Light
 And, rising from its mighty solitude,
 Spoke of the Wheel and eightfold path all right.

A brain by a disordered stomach driven
 Thundered through Europe, conquered, ruled and fell,
 From St. Helena went, perhaps to Heaven.
 Thus wagged on the surreal world, until

A scientist played with atoms and blew out
 The universe before God had time to shout.

DESPAIR ON THE STAIRCASE

Mute stands she, lonely on the topmost stair,
 An image of magnificent despair;
 The grandeur of a sorrowful surmise
 Wakes in the largeness of her glorious eyes.
 In her beauty's dumb significant pose I find
 The tragedy of her mysterious mind.

¹ Mr. Lal, for some reason, has a new name: *One Dreamed and Saw*.

Yet is she stately, grandiose, full of grace.
A musing mask is her immobile face.
Her tail is up like an unconquered flag;
Its dignity knows not the right to wag.
An animal creature wonderfully human,
A charm and miracle of fur-footed Brahman,
Whether she is spirit, woman or a cat,
Is now the problem I am wondering at.

From the picture Mr. Lal has tried to conjure up of Sri Aurobindo one would never anticipate such poetry. If Sri Aurobindo is capable of writing in this vein, he certainly cannot be a hopeless addict to “nebulous images” and “weak-spined” pentameters. Here also are pentameters, though not blank verse, but they are full of vigour and variety. Here also images are at play, but they are handled by a master of precision and particularity. Nor is the author of either poem thinking and imagining in a way quite other than he was wont to do before the “modern” movement in India started faintly stirring in the pre-Independence days. In the early years of our century Sri Aurobindo had already written *A Vision of Science*, in which the poet dreams of three Angels striving within him for mastery. Towards the end of it the second Angel, Science, is asked by the departing Angel of Religion to try and know who she herself really is:

And Science confidently, “Nothing am I but earth,
Tissue and nerve and from the seed a birth,
A mould, a plasm, a gas, a little that is much.
In these grey cells that quiver to the touch
The secret lies of man; they are the thing called I.
Matter insists and matter makes reply.
Shakespeare was this; this force in Jesus yearned

And conquered by the cross; this only learned
 The secret of the suns that blaze afar;
 This was Napoleon's giant mind of war."
 I heard and marvelled in myself to see
 The infinite deny infinity.
 Yet the weird paradox seemed justified;
 Even mysticism shrank out-mystified...

By a strange coincidence, we have exactly fourteen lines again—and the same irony which is yet charged with a high seriousness is present, though with less exuberance and humour. Sri Aurobindo was "modern" two or three decades before the Lalians were born. The fact is: whatever else he was—and he was a great number of things, a rich manifold of culture—he was never less than modern. And his imagination was always powerful and concrete. And, if ever "nebulous", it was only so in the sense that in picturing a nebula in poetry you have to be very accurately nebulous.

The other poem has no early counterpart but the realistic awareness of animal existence and of its beauty or mystery was never absent. It goes back to Sri Aurobindo's late teens when he saw

in emerald fire
 The spotted lizard crawl
 Upon the sun-kissed wall.

In his late twenties he has a bird-simile with a striking Latinism:

As a bright bird comes flying
 From airy extravagance to his own home,
 And breasts his mate, and feels her all his goal—

and there is an animal-vision too in a supernatural setting, the

Death-God Yama's four-eyed dogs which, on either side of him,

rested prone,

Watchful, with huge heads on their paws advanced.

In 1942, *Collected Poems and Plays* (which, most comically, Mr. Lal's anthology always calls *Collected Poems and Prayers*) gives us in a free-verse composition when Sri Aurobindo was past seventy an unforgettable evocation of Death incarnate "in forests of the night":

Gleaming eyes and mighty chest and soft soundless paws of
grandeur and murder.

What poet in Mr. Lal's anthology has anything to match this sight and insight? We should have to go to the pregnant details of Blake's "fearful symmetry" "burning bright" or to Rilke's painting of the tiger with a few vital brush-strokes:

Der weiche Gang gesschmeidig starker Schritte.

(Velvety softness wedding to striding strength.)

As for the humour blended with imaginative empathy in Sri Aurobindo's approach to the common cat, it too stands unrivalled by the anthology's other entries. Mr. Lal himself comes nearest to it in one line on Blake's and Rilke's and Sri Aurobindo's beast of prey—

The tiger licking his five-haired snout—

but how far he is from the fun no less than the fineness of the couplet:

Her tail is up like an unconquered flag;
 Its dignity knows not the right to wag.

Indeed there is more vitality, more feel of reality along with subtlety of perception—more modernness—in this alleged practitioner of the “stilted mystic-incense style” than in all the moderns claiming “the right to wag” their tongues under the inspiration of Mr. Lal’s imaginarily “unconquered flag”.

And when we look back at Sri Aurobindo writing poetry nearly four decades before Independence and confronting not a feline problem as in *Despair on the Staircase* but one before which he still might wonder “whether she is spirit” or “woman” we find what we may term a magical realism which is the very opposite of nebulousness in a pejorative sense or any mystic-incense stiltedness:

Someone leaping from the rocks
 Past me ran with wind-blown locks
 Like a startled bright surmise
 Visible to mortal eyes,—
 Just a cheek of frightened rose
 That with sudden beauty glows,
 Just a footstep like the wind
 And a hurried glance behind,
 And then nothing,—as a thought
 Escapes the mind ere it is caught.
 Someone of the heavenly rout
 From behind the veil ran out.

Compare the exquisitely suggestive clarity of this poem with Mr. Lal’s prominently put lyric which may be taken to set some kind of example of how to write in a non-Aurobindonian manner:

THE PARROT'S DEATH

When rains fall
Is all astir
My green soul,
My prisoner.

November.
Middle age
Struggles, needing
More than a cage.

Soul is to cage
As love to foe.
My loved one, my bird,
Take heart and go!

Where is any modernism, Indian or otherwise, here? No doubt, the opening stanza, in spite of the somewhat awkward inversion in lines 2 and 3, has some charm; but so also has Jean Ingelow's nineteenth-century heart-throb:

When sparrows build, and the leaves break forth,
My old sorrow wakes and cries.

Ingelow, however, is at least free from "blurred sentiments"—Mr. Lal's *bête noire* in relation to that notorious quotation of his from *Savitri*. And, of course, most free is the *locus classicus* of rain-stirring: Chaucer's vision of the pilgrimage to Canterbury

When that Aprille with his shoures sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote.

But we can hardly assert the same of Mr. Lal's lyric. Nor are its "blurred sentiments" left by him to work themselves out in the normal way on the human-animal level. They are raised to a climax of cloudiness (natural, surely, "when rains fall") with the use, twice repeated, of that highly ambiguous word "soul". Better the "soul-stuff" and "soul-ground" of the peccant passage than the insipid parroting of the word without the smallest whiff of "an ampler ether, a diviner air" to give it even a little chance of acquiring a poetic body.

I am afraid criticism like Mr. Lal's will not induce the slightest wavering in anyone's literary allegiance to Sri Aurobindo. And I dare to prophesy that as Mr. Lal grows up he will find himself distant from his present uneasy compromise with regard to Sri Aurobindo's greatness as a poetic figure—more distant than he now is, in his manner though not essentially in his matter, from the essay of 1951 in *The Sunday Standard* in which he still notes "some interesting points" even while he quite frankly admits it to be "a callow, opinionated, over-zealous and slickly-written piece". There is a vein of honesty and good will in Mr. Lal, in addition to a velleity somewhere not to be too narrow in poetic appreciation, all of which is sadly wanting in some other members of his group. These qualities, vague though some of them are, give me the hope that with advancing years he will more and more see eye to eye with me about the work of one who was his own severest critic and who taught his disciples to test all poetic production by the highest standards but at the same time warned them against confining such standards to just one particular school: above all he asked them to keep their minds clear of the *penchants* of the moment, the exaggerations of personal or local tastes and wide open to every poetic possibility.

A CROSS CRITIC CROSS-EXAMINED

I ★

One is appalled by the blithe irresponsibility with which some of our writers launch into deep waters and spout frothy criticisms without realising how badly out of their depth they are. Thus Mr. Nissim Ezekiel, in a review published in the *Sunday Standard* of February 25, 1965, falls foul of Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar for devoting to Sri Aurobindo three chapters of his *Indian Writing in English* and indulges in a little orgy of abuse over a poem of Sri Aurobindo's praised by Iyengar, *Thought the Paraclete*, from which Mr. Ezekiel quotes five lines while criticising all its twenty-two.

He says this poem is "simply execrable verse, a confused unconscious parody of the worst features of English rhetorical style grafted on a degenerate Eastern mysticism". The manner of the pronouncement is hardly in good taste; but, that apart, epithets like "confused" and "degenerate" in relation to anything Aurobindonian make one suspect immediately the very competence of the critic.

Sri Aurobindo's spiritual stature has never been in doubt anywhere in the world, and his mysticism is well known for its large, comprehensive, balanced and harmonious character—a mysticism eminently healthy with its stress on a transformation of physical life no less than of the inner being. Again, all the world has recognised in him an intellect that has marshalled and organised the results of his integral spiritual experience in a most wide-sweeping yet systematic philosophy: Sir Francis Younghusband could not help hailing *The Life Divine* as the

*This section, except for its last paragraph which replaces the old ending, appeared in the *Sunday Standard* in March, 1965.

greatest book of our time and Aldous Huxley calling it “a book not merely of the highest importance as regards its content but remarkably fine as a piece of philosophic and religious literature”.

Yes, here is Sri Aurobindo whose mystical thought appreciates with its calm and clear vision a momentous truth behind the motive and work of western materialism itself, because its own emphasis falls on a new power of the Spirit fulfilling here and now the whole travail of earth's evolution. If anybody could be considered incapable of being “confused”, it would be Sri Aurobindo. And if any phrase about him were the acme of ineptitude it would be: “a degenerate Eastern mysticism.” The critic who can commit himself to such labels is bound to miss the inner imaginative and verbal necessities of many a poem by Sri Aurobindo and to fumble over its form and technique.

Whatever complexity of vision, strangeness of style or peculiarity of construction there may be in the poem cannot but seem to Mr. Ezekiel “execrable rhetoric” or, as he later puts it, “empty abstractions”, “double-barrelled bubbles of sound”, “archaic vocabulary”. It is surprising how little understanding he brings to his job. There is, for instance, the fact clearly set forth by Iyengar that *Thought the Paraclete* is modelled, with the variations needed in English, on the Latin quantitative hendecasyllable. Some of these variations create metrically a demand for a repeated run of compound words: to decry that run offhand is not to know either their visionary or their technical *raison d'être*. Curiously enough, Ezekiel himself feels driven to a compound word in condemning as aptly as he can Sri Aurobindo's “dream-caught”, “gold-red”, “world-bare”, “pale-blue-lined”, “white-fire-veiled”, etc. And he coins his own compound expression as the inevitable one even though he recognises its queerness and tells us: “If my mixed metaphor may be forgiven.” Surely, if a locution like “double-barrelled

bubbles of sound” could strike him as right, he could have bothered to inquire whether Sri Aurobindo’s combinations might not have been organic to the kind of inspiration and art the poem has embodied.

Besides, are compound terms in quick succession a purely Aurobindonian practice? As far as I know, they have been part of poetry from the most ancient times: Homer is chockful of them. And they are an outstanding feature of the poet who more than any other has been praised and commented on in modern criticism. In this respect as in several others, Mr. Ezekiel is just what a late-Victorian conventional reviewer would have been *vis-à-vis* Gerard Manley Hopkins’s packed multiple metaphors, many-worded adjectives and substantives, startling sprung-rhythms, winding structural polyphonies, all charged with religious subtlety as well as passion. But even in Hopkins a degree of awkwardness both of vision and expression may at times be suspected because he was trying to get at depths and nuances of meaning in a region where he was not all at home. Sri Aurobindo, in addition to being an acknowledged master of English, is an established master of the spiritual and the occult no less than of the profoundly psychological. To make him out to be a raw bungling writer and image-fabricator, lingering in an outmoded manner of verse, is to be ineffably naive or perverse. Has Mr. Ezekiel stopped to appreciate, in line after line from the poem at which he waxes vituperative, even the purely rhythmic impact, overtone on sweeping overtone of sound-suggestion stirring the deepest heart—leave aside the sheer vision-energy striking the mind awake to unknown modes of being:

Hungering large-souled to surprise the unconned
 Secrets white-fire-veiled of the last Beyond,
 Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,

Climbing high far ethers eternal-sunned,
 Thought the great-winged wanderer paraclete
 Disappeared slow-singing a flame-word rune...

Whether these lines be fully understood or no, there cannot be by a truly sensitive reader a mistaking of the lofty haunting evocation of a spiritual reality and experience.

Everywhere I find Mr. Ezekiel has failed to approach the poem with the imaginative open-mindedness and aesthetic sympathy that are absolutely essential in dealing with any type of unusual verse and most in assessing poetry that is evidently hieratic. In connection with such poetry, his objection that words like "lustred," "hermit", "boundless," "supernal," "mooned", "rune" are archaic is pointless. And when he accuses of empty abstractions phrases like "the long green crests of the seas of life" and lines such as

Crimson-white mooned oceans of pauseless bliss
 Drew its vague heart-yearnings with voices sweet,

one cannot do better than quote the candid gloss of the poet himself for a somewhat puzzled and diffident but not unfriendly critic. Sri Aurobindo wrote: "I would like to say a word about his hesitation over some lines in *Thought the Paraclete* which describe the spiritual planes. I can understand this hesitation; for these lines have not the vivid and forceful precision of the opening and the close and are less pressed home, they are general in description and therefore to one who has not the mystic experience must seem too large and vague. But they are not padding; a precise and exact description of these planes of experience would have made the poem too long, so only some large lines are given, but the description is true, the epithets hit the reality and even the colours mentioned in the poem, 'gold-

red feet' and 'crimson-white mooned oceans' are faithful to experience. Significant colour, supposed by intellectual criticism to be symbolic but there is more than that, is a frequent element in mystic vision; I may mention the powerful and vivid vision in which Ramakrishna went up into the higher planes and saw the mystic truth behind the birth of Vivekananda..."

Now a final observation. Mr. Ezekiel generalises his case against Sri Aurobindo so as to cover his many volumes of poetry: "This is not merely a difference of opinion between Prof. Iyengar and myself on a few lines of alleged poetry written in English by an Indian. It poses the question whether much of this writing is on the level of literature at all, whether the normal critical categories can be applied to it. Even to call it bad or weak is to hazard making those words meaningless. If mine seems an extreme view I will be content to argue that as a poet Sri Aurobindo has some linguistic habits which virtually destroy the value of the voluminous output."

Well, Mr. Ezekiel does know how to make his generalisation in the grand style. He covers at one stroke the whole China-to-Peru of the Aurobindonian poetic corpus. Nothing, or practically nothing, is permitted to escape the castigation. There is only one course for an admirer of Sri Aurobindo to follow. He must run a rigorous eye swiftly across "the voluminous output" and try to identify everywhere the quirks and kinks of expression that Mr. Ezekiel assures us of and that would set the prolific claimant to poetry quite outside the pale.

2

Let us start with the semi-romantic period of the last century's end and this century's commencement. Here is a spontaneous-seeming and, to all appearance, charming snatch of

youthful fancy entitled *Seasons*, which Mr. Ezekiel will, no doubt, frown upon as being below even designations like “weak” or “bad”:

Day and night begin, you tell me,
 When the sun may choose to set or rise.
 Well, it may be; but for me their changing
 Is determined only by her eyes.

Summer, spring, the fruitless winter
 Hinge, you say, upon the heavenly sun?
 Oh, but I have known a yearlong winter!
 Spring was by her careless smiles begun.

Or let us take those happy-sounding eulogies in the Indian style raised by presiding priests with a mythological Hero-King and an Apsara bride before them in that very early narrative in blank verse, *Urvasie*:

As lightning takes the heart with pleasant dread,
 So love is of the strong Pururavus.
 As breathes sweet fragrance from the flower oppressed,
 So love from thy bruised bosom, Urvasie...

According to Mr. Ezekiel, normal critical categories are irrelevant to such monstrosities of phrase. Much of the young Kalidasa would receive short shrift at this rate.

From the early period we may cull also a few locutions that look forward to Sri Aurobindo the mystic to be. There is that strange vision:

Time like a snake coiling among the stars—

with its sudden sense of the endless and boundless, within which all things have their end and bound. Or the other conjuration, equally strange, with its touch of abysmal mystery:

I have entered caverns dim where death was born.

To Mr. Ezekiel these two lines must certainly fall below the level of literature, escaping as they do by their odd utterance his attempt at concrete formulation of their content: he would brand them as confused, rhetorical, abstract. Could he be doing so because they somehow rise above his level of literary perception?

When we come to a less romantic, more reflective period, we meet with "execrable" effects like:

Not soon is God's delight in us completed,
Nor with one life we end;
Termlessly in us are our spirits seated
And termless joys intend...

With a conviction of progressive rebirth the thinker Sri Aurobindo can say to the ordinarily short-sighted human entity:

An endless future brims beneath thy lashes,
Child of an endless past.

What nonsense is here, couched linguistically in such a manner as to knock all poetry out! Still worse is the device of transferred description pointing the paradoxes of the Absolute in the world:

Delight that labours in its opposite,
Faints in the rose and on the rack is curled...

And when the Absolute is directly figured in His own transcendence with a bold finality of image directing us not only to a mysterious depth but also to an uncomprehended concreteness—

Both Time and Timelessness sink in that sea—

is not Sri Aurobindo just passing off paroxysmal gibberish as philosophical poetry? Or does Mr. Ezekiel's grey cells lock him in from all light?

More or less in the same period Sri Aurobindo buckled down to translating the aphoristic Bhartrihari. A whole book called *A Century of Life* put into compact English that ripe sage who had plumbed all life's moods. Surely, nothing of mysticism, degenerate or otherwise, and nothing that can even be suspected of "double-barrelled bubbles of sound" have issued from Sri Aurobindo's poetic pen here. Take, for one sample, *The Beauty of Giving*:

Be not a miser of thy strength and store;
 Oft in a wounded grace more beauty is.
 The jewel which the careful gravers score;
 The sweet fair girl-wife broken with bridal bliss,
 The rut-worn tusker, the autumnal stream
 With its long beaches dry and slender flood;
 The hero wreathed with victory's diadem,
 Adorned with wounds and glorious with his blood;
 The moon's last disc; rich men of their bright dross,
 By gifts disburdened, fairer shine by loss.

For another sample, savour *Bodies without Mind*:

Some minds there are to Art and Beauty dead,
 Music and poetry on whose dull ear
 Fall barren. Horns grace not their brutish head,

Tails too they lack, yet is their beasthood clear.
That Heaven ordained not upon grass their feasts,
Good fortune is this for the other beasts.

Mr. Ezekiel's "mind", to be consistent, must disbelieve that Sri Aurobindo could feel any affinity to an art like Bhartrihari's. But no rubbing of the eyes will prove illusory a hundred Aurobindonian evidences of poetry, either smooth-shining or glitter-pointed, comparable to

The jewel which the careful gravers score.

Coming to the mystical period proper, what do we encounter? The old romanticism undergoes an intense change but no whit of the passion and poignancy is gone, as can be demonstrated from stanzas like:

Bride of the Fire, clasp me now close,—
Bride of the Fire!
I have shed the bloom of the earthly rose,
I have slain desire.

Beauty of the Light, surround my life,—
Beauty of the Light!
I have sacrificed longing and parted from grief,
I can bear thy delight.

Image of ecstasy, thrill and enlace,—
Image of bliss!
I would see only thy marvellous face,
Feel only thy kiss.

Voice of Infinity, sound in my heart,—
Call of the One!

Stamp there thy radiance, never to part,
O living Sun.

What linguistic habits could be said to betray their own deplorableness in this lyric? Perhaps we may feel like criticising as a bad habit the repetition of the opening phrase of stanza 1 in the next line and a similar procedure in stanza 2 and a near-approach to it in stanza 3. But if we attend a little to the recurrences we shall discover not only that they are natural to the movement of the rapt state which is there in the poem; we shall discover also that the reiteration is most apt because of the concluding phrase of the first line in each of the stanzas concerned. When the Bride of the Fire is told, “clasp me now close”, the very embrace wanted is suggested by the coming again of the same words: it is as if the Bride’s fiery arms were being drawn from either side to hold the aspirant to her heart. The entreaty—“surround my life”—demands, as it were, that the Beauty of the Light apostrophised should be equally present in words at both ends. “Thrill and enlace” is an invitation expecting a passionate enfoldment by the Image of ecstasy: it must be followed up by a corresponding turn hemming “my life” in, so to speak. By contrast, stanza 4 brings no reappearance of its opening appeal. Although the same inseparableness is connoted by “sound in my heart”, it is not formulated in so many words: hence “Voice of Infinity” can be replaced by “Call of the One” without yet the lines losing by the change rung there the inner sense of the adorer’s fusion with the object of adoration since that object, being Infinity grown vocal, is necessarily the one and only Real beckoning the mystic. Sensitive poetic logic and not mechanical stop-gap habit is at work in the first three stanzas.

Again habit in the same significant mode only can be laid at the door of the last line of a sonnet belonging to the late mystical

phase and bringing in a deliberate mental energy rather than the sheer lyric cry. This piece strikes me as an extremely moving bit of inner autobiography, which shows what supreme sacrifice goes hand in hand with the spiritual liberation when the Yogi is bent on being the Eternal's Worker in time and space and does not rest with liberation into Eternity;

Often, in the slow ages' long retreat
On Life's thin ridge through Time's enormous sea,
I have accepted death and borne defeat
To gain some vantage by my fall for Thee.

For Thou hast given the Inconscient the dark right
To oppose the shining passage of my soul
And levy at each step the tax of Night:
Doom, her august accountant, keeps the roll.

All around me now the Titan forces press;
This world is theirs, they hold its days in fee;
I am full of wounds and the fight merciless.
Is it not yet Thy hour of victory?

Even as Thou wilt! What still to Fate Thou owest,
O Ancient of the worlds, Thou knowest, Thou knowest.

Are we in the presence of empty abstractions swollen out with a wind of colourful language? Speech more direct, more realistic cannot be conceived; but of course the directness is from deep within a being who is not circumscribed by the passing body of one brief existence lit by the surface-gazing of a small human mind—and the realism includes Titan forces, the dark Inconscient and the Ancient of the worlds no less than the slow ages and Time's enormous sea and the days of this material

world where life, in the Upanishad's phrase, is one long hunger that is death. Maybe Mr. Ezekiel will brush all of Sri Aurobindo's sonnets away as bombastic mystagogism, but, if he does so, how shall we excuse him when it happens that he is himself a true poet by fits and starts and is not unacquainted with seeming abstractions like "God", "soul" and "that inward eye", as two fine stanzas from an Emily-Dickinsonian poem of his will show:

God grant me privacy,
Secretive as the mole,
Inaccessibility
But only of the soul...

God grant me certainty
In kinships with the sky,
Air, earth, fire, sea—
And the fresh inward eye...

Sri Aurobindo would have been drawn to these lines, comprehensive as was the sensitive net of his aesthetic awareness. He had a relish even for modernist modes of expression, when they were inspired: .

"There is a 'poeticism' which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.... I agree with the modernists in their revolt against the romanticist's insistence on emotionalism and his objection to thinking and philosophical reflection in poetry. But the modernist went too far in his revolt. In trying to avoid what I may call poeticism he ceased to be poetic; wishing to escape from rhetorical writing, rhetorical pretension to greatness and beauty of style, he threw out true poetic greatness and beauty, turned from a deliberately poetic

style to a colloquial tone and even to very flat writing; especially he turned away from poetic rhythm to a prose or half-prose rhythm or to no rhythm at all. Also, he weighed too much on thought and has lost the habit of intuitive sight; by turning emotion out of its intimate chamber in the house of Poetry, he has had to bring in to relieve the dryness of much of his thought too much exaggeration of the lower vital and sensational reactions untransformed or else transformed only by exaggeration. Nevertheless he has perhaps restored to the poet the freedom to think as well as to adopt a certain straightforwardness and directness of style...

“Evidently, you cannot justly apply to the poetry of Whitman the principles of technique which are proper to the old metrical verse or the established laws of the old traditional poetry; so too when we deal with a modernist poet. We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective...”

Again, apropos of a question about the lines in *Savitri*—

Knowledge was rebuilt from cells of inference
Into a fixed body flasque and perishable—

Sri Aurobindo wrote: “‘Flasque’ is a French word meaning ‘slack’, ‘loose’, ‘flaccid’, etc. I have more than once tried to thrust in a French word like this, for instance, ‘A harlot empress in a bouge’—somewhat after the manner of Eliot and Ezra Pound.”

Now that *Savitri* has been mentioned we may dip into it with the very passage to which Sri Aurobindo here refers. It is about an occult dimension explored by Savitri’s father Aswapathy:

Into an armoured fierce domain he came
And saw himself wandering like a lost soul
Amid grimed walls and savage slums of Night.
Around him crowded grey and squalid huts
Neighbouring proud palaces of perverted Power,
Inhuman quarters and demoniac wards.
A pride in evil hugged its wretchedness;
A misery haunting splendour pressed those fell
Dun suburbs of the cities of dream-life.
There Life displayed to the spectator soul
The shadow depths of her strange miracle.
A strong and fallen goddess without hope,
Obscured, deformed by some dire Gorgon spell,
As might a harlot empress in a bouge,
Nude, unashamed, exulting she upraised
Her evil face of perilous beauty and charm
And, drawing panic to a shuddering kiss
Twixt the magnificence of her fatal breasts,
Allured to their abyss the spirit's fall.

What the modernists very often fail to achieve is here: "true poetic greatness and beauty"—but with "a certain straightforwardness and directness of style" and always mindful of "poetic rhythm." and with no loss of "the habit of intuitive sight". Mr. Ezekiel has stressed Sri Aurobindo's "linguistic habits". There are actually no such trends in Sri Aurobindo: his language varies as the occasion and the theme vary. "The habit of intuitive sight" is the only persistent trait of his poetic character.

This trait may not present a grave problem to the reader when the occasion and the theme are such that things familiar or akin to them or conjecturable through a new combination of them call out to his imaginative perception. But a fair amount

of matter in *Savitri* is of a different order. "*Savitri*," says Sri Aurobindo, "is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch; ...there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover, if it is really new in kind, it may employ a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable.... I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu près* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do. The critic or reader will judge for himself whether I have succeeded or failed; but if he has seen nothing and understood nothing, it does not follow that his adverse judgment is sure to be the right and true one, there is at least a chance that he may so conclude, not because there is nothing to see and nothing to understand, only poor pseudo-stuff or a rhetorical emptiness but because he was not equipped for the vision or the understanding."

The above is as if penned precisely to answer an Ezekiel cross with poetry like *Thought the Paraclete*. But, even were it true that such poetry was of a dubious nature, it would be a gross procedure either to condemn all *Savitri* out of hand or to put a stigma on the whole of Sri Aurobindo's poetic production. *Savitri* itself is not esoteric throughout. It takes up most problems of human thought and deals with them in a large light, as in a passage like:

Pain is the hand of Nature sculpturing men
 To greatness; an inspired labour chisels
 With heavenly cruelty an unwilling mould.
 Implacable in the passion of their will,
 Lifting the hammers of titanic toil
 The demiurges of the universe work;
 They shape with giant strokes their own; their sons
 Are marked with their enormous stamp of fire.

A new Aeschylus seems to find tongue in this grandiose vision. But Sri Aurobindo does not always pitch his note so high. He can "pactise", as a neologism of his own would put it, with common things and borrow his imagery from them without a real drop:

Nothing is all our own that we create;...
 The genius too receives from some high fount
 Concealed in a supernal secrecy
 The work that gives him an immortal name...
 A sample from the laboratory of God
 Of which he holds the patent upon earth,
 Comes to him wrapt in golden coverings;
 He listens for Inspiration's postman knock
 And takes delivery of the priceless gift

A little spoilt by the receiver mind
Or mixed with the manufacture of his brain:
When least defaced, then is it most divine.
Although his ego claims the world for its use,
Man is a dynamo for the cosmic work;
Nature does most in him, God the high rest:
Only his soul's acceptance is his own.

When *Savitri* is not “philosophy” as here or “symbol” as elsewhere, it is “legend”—and in that legend there is a passionate play of the human heart. Its announced theme is Love—Love that has chosen once and will not choose again no matter if it is overshadowed by Doom. The long debate between Love and Death makes excellent dramatic verse. When Yama the Death-God claims to be the real world-creator and says to Savitri:

“Mortal, whose spirit is my wandering breath,
Whose transience was imagined by my smile,
Flee clutching thy poor gains to thy trembling breast...
Depart in peace, if peace for man is just”—

Savitri replies:

“Who is this God imagined by thy night,
Contemptuously creating worlds disdained,
Who made for vanity the brilliant stars?
Not he who has reared his temple in my thoughts
And made his sacred floor my human heart.
My God is Will and triumphs in his paths,
My God is Love and sweetly suffers all.
To him I have offered hope for sacrifice
And gave my longings as a sacrament.
Who shall prohibit or hedge in his course,

The wonderful, the charioteer, the swift?
 A traveller of the million roads of life,
 His steps familiar with the lights of heaven
 Tread without pain the sword-paved courts of hell;
 There he descends to edge eternal joy..."

The last three lines make us feel, with a typical Dantesque brevity of suggestion though in a more imaged manner and with an acuter substance, the descent as of a beatific Beatrice into Inferno:

Io son fatta da Dio, sua merce tale,
 Che la vostra misera non mi tange,
 Ni fiamma d'este incendio non m'assale.¹

Yes, we meet with real dramatic quality in the Savitri-legend. And then there is Sri Aurobindo the writer of actual dramas: five full plays palpitant with various motifs against a background of history and coloured with the dreams and deeds of diverse cultures pass before us to prove that Sri Aurobindo is not just mystical vision and spiritual experience. Though behind all that the plays set forth we feel the pressure of cosmic forces and supra-terrestrial influences, they do not intrude in any way to render the mind erratic or the flesh anaemic. And one of the works, *The Viziers of Bassora*, a favourite of Sri Aurobindo's, is a hilarious comedy, delightfully down-to-earth—not indeed without idealism but everywhere shot with irrepressible vitality.

Besides the dramas, we have the long hexametrical epic *Ilion* concerned with the last day of the siege of Troy; heroes from Homer or those allied to them move in and out and we get

1. I may translate, of course inadequately, thus:

The grace of God has made my spirit such
 I move untroubled by your suffering,
 Nor me these cruel tongues of fire can touch.

tussles of politics and confrontations of warfare and tensions of love as well as high debate in the empyrean among the Gods. Even in the Gods' assembly we witness intense pulls this way and that of universal ideas and emotions, aspirations and ambitions. Aphrodite, knowing that Zeus has willed in favour of Hera and Pallas, comes with

her perfect mouth a rose of resistance
Chidingly budded 'gainst Fate...

Passionate and desperate are some of her words:

"What though no second Helen find a second Paris,...
Ever while earth is embraced by the sun and hot with his
 kisses...
Me shall men seek with my light or their darkness, sweetly
 or crudely,
Cold on the ice of the north or warm with the heats of the
 southland,
Slowly enduring my touch or with violence rapidly burning.
I am the sweetness of living, I am the touch of the Master
Love shall die bound to my stake like a victim adorned as for
 bridal,
Life shall be bathed in my flames and be purified gold or ashes.
I, Aphrodite, shall move the world for ever and ever..."

The War-God Ares, denied his free dominion, refuses to dwell in Greece and looks forward to the Greeks' successors in Europe:

“Consuls browed like the cliffs and plebeians stern of the
 wolf-brood,
 Senates of kings and armies of granite that grow by disaster...”

These shall fulfil him until they too

“Slowly with haughtiness perish compelled by mortality’s
transience
Leaving a Roman memory stamped on the ages of weakness...”

All this is epic utterance, and for nearly 5000 lines we have Sri Aurobindo fused with Homer. Evidently Mr. Ezekiel knows nothing of *Ilion*’s superb achievement—and yet he passes final sentence on Sri Aurobindo’s value as poet.

In the very field of spirituality we have not only lofty vision articulated with a masterly control but also in one place a rare note of laughter and irony. The realisation of the infinite Self free from the flux of nature has been one of India’s highest spiritual ideals. In many a sonnet Sri Aurobindo has quintes-senced the experience in words; but his own ideal is not merely the inner liberation, and in the sonnet called *Self* he has hit off unforgettably the fiasco to which it often leads:

He said, “I am egoless, spiritual, free”,
Then swore because his dinner was not ready.
I asked him why. He said, “It is not me,
But the belly’s hungry god who gets unsteady.”

I asked him why. He said, “It is his play.
I am unmoved within, desireless, pure.
I care not what may happen day by day.”
I questioned him, “Are you so very sure?”

He answered, “I can understand your doubt.
But to be free is all. It does not matter
How you may kick and howl and rage and shout,
Making a row over your daily platter.

To be aware of self is liberty,
Self I have got and, having self, am free.”

Another sidelight on the poet who was a practitioner of “the Integral Yoga” is his keen interest in world-events. One remembers his open declaration of whole-hearted sympathy with the Allied cause during the Second Great War in spite of admitting that the Allies were far from spotless and were but the Imperialists of yesterday. On October 16, 1939 he wrote *The Dwarf Napoleon*, a diatribe on Hitler, exposing his false and futile ambition to be

Even as the immense colossus of the past.

Sri Aurobindo, with the Yogi’s eye, discerned an occult reality at work behind Hitler:

A Titan Power supports this pigmy man—

and he read a terrible threat to earth-life’s evolutionary possibilities if the Swastika were to triumph. What is most remarkable about the poem, however, is its ending:

In his high villa on the fatal hill
Alone he listens to that sovereign Voice,
Dictator of his action’s sudden choice,
The tiger leap of a demoniac skill.
Too small and human for that dreadful Guest,
An energy his body cannot invest,—
A tortured channel, not a happy vessel,
Drives him to think and act and cry and wrestle.
Thus driven he must stride on conquering all,
Threatening and clamouring, brutal, invincible,

Perhaps to meet upon his storm-swept road
A greater devil—or thunderstroke of God.

Let us fix firmly in our minds the date when this was written: it was, as we have said, October 16, 1939. Already before its composition Hitler had made a pact with the only other Titan one saw on the scene: Stalin. That was on August 23 of the same year. Britain and France had but recently—September 3—gone to war with Germany. Hitler's most sensational striding on and conquering all was still in the future. And it was not before June 22, 1941, that Hitler broke with Stalin and attacked Russia. Only on November 25, 1942 the tide of battle in Russia began to turn against Hitler at Stalingrad. Rommell's crack-up in Tunisia, face to face with British and Commonwealth armies, came as late as May 12, 1943. The invasion of Normandy by Anglo-American troops was still years away: it began on June 6, 1944. Sri Aurobindo's poem proves more than an occult realism: it proves also a spiritual prophetism. And we may emphasise the precision of the prophetic note. The poet mentions not only a "greater devil" but also a "thunderstroke of God". The former expression points to the combating of the gruesome Nazi "New Order" by the more massive totalitarian machine and monster of Stalinist Communism. The latter phrase sums up the decisive action of the Western democracies, behind which, in spite of their defects, Sri Aurobindo saw the Divine Power operating. One may thus picture, through the alternatives listed in Sri Aurobindo's last line, Hitler met on two fronts by roughly two forces of opposite characters, either of them stronger in the end than the one of which his body served as the channel or vessel. There is certainly no mystical degeneracy in the poem and the accent is ringing and positive. No critic can complain of befuddlement on any score.

It should be evident that Mr. Ezekiel has overshot his mark

by miles. And we may close here but for a delicious bit of ganging agley of the plans of mice and men. It must compose our *grand finale*. The poem of Mr. Ezekiel's from which we have quoted two effective stanzas as well as another piece, *Enterprise*, which narrates what "started as a pilgrimage" and ended thus:

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to gather grace—

both these compositions of distinct merit yet in no particularly memorable key occur in *An Anthology of Commonwealth Verse*, edited by Margaret J. O'Donnell and published in 1963. The compilation includes also a poem by Mr. P. Lal, *A Song of Beauty*, whose basic note is well represented by its commencement:

If it were less beautiful,
And my eyes did not catch beauty, if in the morning
My eyes did not catch beauty,
I would have peace.

*O Beauty fair goddess
deign to be kind on my heart your worshipper.*

Rather milk-and-water Georgian stuff, this, sentimental though not devoid of all attraction. But in the same compilation we have also a poem of Sri Aurobindo's. In the Introduction to the part distinguished as "Poetry from India" we read about Sri Aurobindo: "The younger Ghose [the elder was Manmohan] is one of the great Indian poets of this century. He is experimental and highly individual... His poems are much influenced

by modern science and are deeply philosophical... Young modern poets, however, have revolted against his style and consider his influence to be a danger to contemporary Indo-Anglian poetry, dismissing his work as ‘greasy, weak-spined and purple-adjetived’.” The pejorative epithets are from a Manifesto by Mr. Lal. So too are some other words later on in the Introduction, where these young poets are described to “have set themselves to free Indo-Anglian poetry from what they call the ‘blurred and rubbery sentiments’ of the Aurobindonian school”, to which, among others, K. D. Sethna is said to belong—“all of them considerable poets” in the compiler’s opinion. If Mr. Ezekiel had been on the rampage against Sri Aurobindo before 1963 his vinegar would also have seeped into the Introduction as smacking of “young modern poets”. But, for all the hostility meant to find a reflex there, the Introduction cannot be regarded as fundamentally hostile to Sri Aurobindo: when it speaks in its own voice it does not echo Mr. Lal or anticipate Mr. Ezekiel. How can it, indeed, when the compiler could pick out from both these progressive poets no very modernist inspiration nor anything striking deep either by sublimity, poignancy or ingenuity? But what a contrast to their efforts is the sonnet cited from Sri Aurobindo, *A Dream of Surreal Science*,¹ satirising the vagaries of modern materialism and ending:

A scientist played with atoms and blew out
The universe before God had time to shout.

Surely, after poetry with such an accent, the reader of Mr. Ezekiel’s sweeping denunciation needs a little re-thinking.

Perhaps our critic will argue: “From the vast range of Sri Aurobindo’s writings the anthologist could take no sample of Sri Aurobindo the Yogi. She must have found everything

¹ See p. 440 for the whole poem.

inadequate there and could pick out merely this non-Yogic piece. It must be, in her view, a fine freak. It condemns rather than recommends the spiritual poetry. And possibly even the rest of Sri Aurobindo failed to impress her as poetic enough in spite of its would-be lofty language."

But there can be no such implication in the choice. The anthologist has particularly read in Sri Aurobindo a poet inclined to philosophy and interested in science, and here she felt was an apt example, with the additional merit of a humour that, like "the innumerable laughter of the waves" heard by Aeschylus, had depths under it. She appears to have thought Sri Aurobindo's directly Yogic work not suitable for a popular book even though it obviously was contributory to his being "a considerable poet". Her picking out *A Dream of Surreal Science* imbues it with no freakish hue. And what the piece drives home to us is simply that the most vigorous, open-gazed, modern utterance is from somebody whom Mr. Ezekiel and his tribe picture as bombinating in the void. There is no proof that the same essential power which is expressed elsewhere is not expressing itself here, the difference lying only in the existential aspect, the special mood and mould adopted. Nor can this mood and mould be cut apart entirely from Sri Aurobindo the Yogi. As with *The Dwarf Napoleon*, the date of the sonnet is worth attending to: it is September 25, 1939, three weeks before that poem. And yet the Atom Bomb, which at that time was regarded as almost impossible of realisation, is already foreseen by the sonneteer—six years in advance of the destruction of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and many more ahead of the menace of the mushroom cloud to the whole world with the invention of the Hydrogen Bomb. Behind the felicitous wit there is once more the spiritual seer.

That seer is no juggler with pompous rhetoric in verse: he is a true poet with eyes cast widely outward at the same time

that they are turned deeply inward; and the seer-poet is himself but the culmination of a visionary force which from the beginning bore, again and again, the master word of a many-sided creativity.

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